Part One

Beginnings

1942-1967

Chapter One

I am an Israeli, but also a Palestinian.

I was born in February 1942 in British-ruled Palestine, amid a few newly planted orange groves and a cluster of wood-and-tarpaper huts. We lived a few hundred yards from an Arab village. It was called Wadi Khawaret, and it suddenly disappeared, with the establishment of the State of Israel, when I was six years old.

There is a temptation to pretend that this gave me some special, early insight into the stories of *both* of our peoples, Jews and Arabs, in the land which each of us sees as our own. But that isn't true. It *is* true that I was never raised to hate the Arabs. I never did, even during my 36 years in the army, when I had to fight them. Later, as Prime Minister, I went further than any Israeli leader in seeking a peace treaty with the Palestinians, and the creation of a Palestinian state. Yet in the beginning, things were very different. The State of Israel had not yet been born. It was far from certain that it would be. Much of the world seems to have forgotten the dire circumstances, and the mix of desperate sacrifice and idealism, in which it was created.

Zionism, the political platform for the establishment of a Jewish state, has become a term of abuse not just in the Arab and Islamic world, but among some of Israel's more demagogic critics in the West. It saddens me to admit that our own political leaders have helped create a climate in which such misrepresentations, or outright lies, have become easier to peddle. Beyond the policy differences I have with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his more right-wing cabinet colleagues, I'm convinced that the tone of their political discourse has been deeply damaging. By pretending that the Jews of modern-day Israel face a real danger of extinction, and using this as a justification for narrow-minded truculence at home and defiance abroad, they also appear to have lost touch with what Zionism was originally about.

Zionism was meant to allow Jews to achieve self-determination and security in their own state. It emerged, in the late 1800s, in response to a brutal reality. The majority of the world's Jews, who lived in the Tsarist Russian empire and in Poland, had no viable future. They were trapped in a vise of centuries-old Christian anti-Semitism, economic restrictions, and violent attacks on their communities. Even in the democracies of Western Europe, they were not necessarily secure. Theodor Herzl published the foundation text of Zionism in

1896. It was called *Der Judenstaat,* “The Jewish State”. Herzl was a journalist and writer in Vienna and, on the face of it, an unlikely spokesman for a return to Zion. He was a thoroughly assimilated Jew. But his life had been transformed by a reporting assignment. It was in Paris, not Warsaw or Kiev. He covered the treason trial – on trumped up charges, with manufactured evidence – of the French Jewish army officer Alfred Dreyfus.

“We have sincerely tried everywhere to merge with the national communities in which we live, seeking only to preserve the faith of our fathers,” he wrote in *Der Judenstaat*. “It is not permitted to us. In vain are we loyal patriots, sometimes super-loyal. In vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow citizens. In vain do we strive to enhance the fame of our native lands in the arts and sciences, or her wealth by trade and commerce. In our native lands, where we have lived for centuries, we are still decried as aliens.”

During the first years of the 20th century, more than a million Jews did flee Eastern Europe for a new life. Yet barely 30,000 returned to Palestine. By far most of them made their way, through Ellis Island, to the United States. The great majority stayed put. They were too deeply settled, too fearful of exchanging their known hardships for an unknowable future, or too old to pick up and leave. When Jewish emigration to Palestine did grow, in the 1920s and 1930s, it was fueled by the young. More and more East European Jews in their teens or twenties saw *their* future in Zionism. The real change, however, came when Jews faced not only discrimination, or even pogroms. It was when Hitler’s Germany began systematically, industrially, to slaughter them.

From 1939 until the beginning of 1942 when I was born, more than a million Jews had already been killed. Three weeks before my birth, Nazi security chiefs met in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee to put in place the details of their so-called “Final Solution of the Jewish problem”. A few months later, Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, designated the concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland as a dedicated extermination center. One million Jews were put to there alone. A total of six million were murdered by the time the war was over. The scale of the killings was known by the summer of 1942. Yet almost the entire world, including the United States, rejected pleas to provide a haven for those who might still have been saved.

Even when Hitler was defeated in 1945, the British shut the doors of Palestine to those Jews who had managed to survive.

* * *

I was three years old when the Holocaust ended. I was only five in 1947, at the start of an undeclared Arab war to prevent the establishment of even a patchwork State of Israel, limited to areas of existing Jewish settlement and without the city of Jerusalem. I was just six when the state was established in May 1948, and neighboring Arab countries sent in their armies to try to snuff it out in its infancy. Still, even as a young boy, I could not help but be aware of the dramatic events swirling around me.

Mishmar Hasharon, the hamlet in central Israel where I spent the first 17 years of my life, was the embodiment of the Zionist ideal. It was one of the first *kibbutzim*. These collective farming settlements had their roots in Herzl's view that an avant-garde of "pioneers" would have to settle a homeland which was still economically and socially undeveloped, and where even farming was difficult. Members of Jewish youth movements from Eastern Europe provided most of the pioneers. They came to Palestine after having trained in how to clear land and cultivate it, how to build simple dwellings and live with a minimum of creature comforts. They also arrived with a utopian vision. Everything would be shared among them. They would take care of one another. They subscribed to the old socialist maxim: to each according to his need; from each according to his ability.

They saw themselves as doing more than planting the seeds of a future state. They wanted to be part of transforming what it meant to be a Jew. During centuries of diaspora, we had excelled in creating tradespeople and shopkeepers, accountants, doctors and lawyers. Scientists and academics. Distinguished rabbis. On the *kibbutzim*, Jews would work the land and live from their own toil. To the pioneers, this was part of a broader aim of Zionism, a message more powerful and poignant after the murder of the six million. It was that the Jewish people would finally take control of their own destiny.

They also trained to be able to fight. From the outset, this created an internal tension: between Zionism's national aims and the ethical code at the heart of Judaism. Most early Zionists were secular Jews. Mishmar Hasharon, like almost all the *kibbutzim,* was non-religious. Yet the dream of regaining sovereignty in Palestine was inseparable from the faith and traditions of Judaism. Even the non-observant Zionists believed that beyond establishing a state, we had a

responsibility, in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible, to act as *"or le goyim"* – a "light unto the nations".

The Zionist paragon of a new kind of "fighting" Jew was not meant to turn all Jews into soldiers. Its aim was to instill in us a readiness to sacrifice individual interests, even individual safety, for the greater goal. Like other Israelis, when I was a teenager I was taken up a large, yellowish-tan mesa in the Judaean desert, called Massada. It was there, after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, that a band of Jewish zealots confronted the Roman army. They ended up taking their own lives, rather than surrender. My friends outside Israel have always found it bizarre, even macabre, that we should celebrate an act of mass suicide. But that part of the story was a mere footnote for the pioneers and politicians seeking to establish a Jewish state. The real moral was that if we were going to succeed, every one of us had to be willing to make whatever individual contribution was necessary, even to the point of laying down our lives.

Whether Jews would actually have to fight for their state was a matter of sharp debate among the early Zionists. Many of them at least hoped the State of Israel could be established without an armed struggle. They were at pains to draw a distinction between Zionism and the kind of imperialist conquest which the Western powers had pursued in the Middle East. "A country without a people, for a people without a country" was the enticingly simple picture some of Herzl's first disciples painted of a Jewish return to Palestine. The phrase was coined by the British Jewish writer Israel Zangwill at the turn of the 1900s. Yet as late as 1914, even Chaim Weizmann, head of the World Zionist Congress and a future president of Israel, was echoing his words.

The roughly 600,000 Jews who actually lived in Palestine by the time I was born knew that vision was unrealistic. Technically, Zangwill may have been right: there had never been a distinctly Palestinian national entity on this land. But Palestine was not a country without *people*. There were more than a million Arabs, many with roots going back centuries.The Zionist political mainstream led by David Ben-Gurion did resist, at least publicly, the idea that armed conflict was inevitable. But the main right-wing Zionist thinker, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, argued it was naive to assume the Arab population would not fight to prevent a Jewish state. Already, Jews in towns and settlements around Palestine were being targeted by attacks. And Ben-Gurion himself was at least preparing for the possibility of war. The main pre-state militia, the Haganah,

numbered around 30,000 by the start of the 1940s. A smaller, specially trained strike force called the Palmach was set up in 1941.

* * *

Even for many Israelis nowadays, and certainly for Americans or Europeans, the all-consuming collectivism of life on an early kibbutz will seem hard to imagine. Among the few dozen families in Mishmar Hasharon when I was born, there was no such thing as private property. All our assets, meager though they were, were communally owned and allocated. Decisions on any issue of importance were taken at the *aseifa*, the weekly meeting of all kibbutz members in our dining hall.

We children were *raised* collectively as well. We lived in dormitories, organized by age-group and overseen by a carer: in Hebrew, a *metapelet.* For three or four hours every afternoon and from Friday night until sundown on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, we would go off to see our parents. Otherwise, we lived and learned in a world consisting almost entirely of other children.

Once we were moved out of the "infants' house" at the age of three – one of only three concrete structures at the time, along with our security building, and the water tower at the center of the kibbutz – we lived in narrow, oblong cabins. They were known as *batei yeledim*, the children's homes. There were four of us to a room. The rooms were empty except for our beds, under which we placed our pair of shoes or sandals, depending on the season. At one end of the corridor was a set of shelves, where we would collect a clean set of underwear, pants and socks each week. At the other end were the toilets – at that point, the only indoor toilets on the kibbutz – and our shower room. Everyone, boys and girls, showered together until the age of twelve. I can't think of a single one of us who went on to marry someone from our own age-group in the kibbutz. It would have seemed almost incestuous. We grew up like brothers and sisters.

I was only vaguely aware, as a very young child, of a world outside Mishmar Hasharon: the older Jewish settlements between us and the Mediterranean, a few miles to the west. The city of Tel Aviv two dozen miles to the south. Or the continent of Europe, the world war, and the Holocaust. My fondest early memories are of our "children's farm" – the grains and vegetables we grew; the goats and sheep we tended; the hens and chickens that gave us our first

experience of how life was created. And the aroma wafting from the kibbutz bakery, where we could see the young men, sweat gleaming on their chests as they took the loaves from the oven and placed them on wooden boards to cool, producing bread not just for us but for villages and settlements all around.

I realize that the idea of a child living separately from his parents now seems bizarre. Mishmar Hasharon and the other kibbutzim have long since abandoned the practice. There are some in my generation of kibbutz children who look back on the way we were raised not only with regret, but real pain. Yet my own memories, and those of most of the children I grew up with, are more positive.

We probably spent as much waking time with our mothers and fathers as a town or city kid whose parents worked eight-to-five jobs. The difference came at night, especially when we were young. If we woke up unsettled or ill, the only immediate prospect of comfort was whatever grown-up was on duty for the night. I do remember, one stormy winter night when I was nine, being in the grips of a terrible fever. I had begun to hallucinate. I got to my feet. Without a thought of looking elsewhere for help, I made my way through the mud to my parents' room, which was a few hundred feet away. I fell into their bed. They hugged me, and dabbled my forehead with water. The next morning, my father wrapped me in a blanket and took me back to the children's home.

To the extent I was aware that my kibbutz childhood was different from that of other kids, I was given to understand that our experience was not abnormal, but special. In Israeli newspapers, we kibbutzniks were always referred to as *halutzim*, the pioneers. When I got a bit older, I did ask my mother why other children got to live in their own apartments in places like Tel Aviv. "They are *ironim*," she replied. "City-dwellers." Her tone of voice made it clear they were to be viewed as a slightly lesser species.

* * *

My mother, Esther, grew up in Warsaw. She was the oldest of the six surviving children of Samuel and Rachel Godin. Two daughters had been stillborn. Poland at the time was home to the largest Jewish community in the world, more than three million in all. Yet the Godins' roots there were more tenuous. Before the First World War, my mother's parents had made their way from Smolensk, southwest of Moscow, across to Warsaw, which was also under

Tsarist rule. But the war changed everything. The Bolshevik Revolution toppled the tsars. Poland became independent, under the nationalist general Josef Pilsuldski. The Goldins faced a stark choice: either flee back east, into now-Communist Russia, or stay in the new Polish state, though without citizenship, because they had not been born there. They chose Pilsuldski over Lenin. They lived in the heart of the Jewish part of the city, in what would later become the Warsaw Ghetto, on Nalewski Street, a bustling thoroughfare which fanned off into a series of courtyards full of tenement blocks and shops and stalls of all descriptions. The Gordins lived in an apartment block at Number 9, and Samuel Goldin eked out a living as a book-binder.

My mother went to a normal Polish state school. She initially came to Zionism not out of any fully formed political conviction. She was responding to the reality of her parents' meager existence, living on the refugee fringes of a Jewish community that was itself precariously placed in a newly assertive Poland. She simply could not see a future for herself or other young Jews there.

As a teenager, she joined the Zionist youth group called Gordonia. She began studying Hebrew. Every summer, she and her friends hiked into the Carpathian mountains for *hachshara*. The Hebrew word means "preparation". It was meant to give them the tools needed to become kibbutzniks in Palestine. They spent their days as farm laborers for local Polish landowners. The evenings were reserved for political debate, and discussion about how they would put the ideals of their Zionism into practice.

My mother was one of a group of sixty Gordonia pioneers who arrived in Mishmar Hasharon in 1935. She had just turned twenty-two. She must have come with a sense that only now was her life truly beginning. It was a feeling that never left her. Yet it was always clouded by the memory of the family she left behind. When the Second World War began and the Germans overran Poland, two of her sisters managed to flee north to Moscow. Her teenage brother, Avraham, went underground, joining the partisans. All three survived the war, though Avraham died a few months later, from diabetes. Yet in the autumn of 1940, the rest of the family found themselves inside the Ghetto, along with the city's other 400,000 Jews. Both my mother's parents, as well as her 13-year-old brother Itzik and her little sister Henya, who was just 11, died there. For years, my mother believed they were murdered in the concentration camp of Treblinka, where the Nazis began deporting the Jews of Warsaw in 1942. But it turned out they were among the 100,000, mostly women and children, who died from starvation and disease before the deportations began.

When my mother got to the kibbutz, her Gordonia friends assumed she would marry a young man named Ya'akov Margalit, who was the leader of their group in Warsaw and had arrived six months ahead of them. But as she embarked on her new life, he was often back in Poland, training and arranging papers for further groups of Gordonia pioneers. He did not disappear from her life completely. He wrote her long letters when he was away. In fact, that was how my mother first met Yisrael Mendel Brog – my father. Known as Srulik, his Yiddish nickname, he was three years older than she was. He had arrived in Palestine in 1930, five years before her. He was an ordinary kibbutz worker, a tractor-driver, who had been at Mishmar Hasharon from the beginning.

He was already an orphan when he arrived in Palestine. He was only two when any hopes of an ordinary childhood were ripped away from him. He was born in the Jewish *shtetl* of Pushelat in Lithuania, where his own father, although the only member of the community with rabbinical training, made his living as a pharmacist. By the early 1900s, hundreds of villagers had joined the exodus of East European Jews to America. Yet Pushelat still had nearly a thousand inhabitants when a fire broke out gutting dozens of homes, as well as the town's large wooden synagogue. Donations arrived from the recent emigrants to the United States, and my paternal grandfather was put in charge of holding the money until rebuilding plans were worked out. With winter approaching, he sought the counsel of one of Europe's leading rabbinical authorities: Yitzhak Rabinowitz, or *Rav Itzele*, who headed the yeshivah in the nearby town of Ponovezh. The rabbi ruled that rebuilding the synagogue could wait until warmer weather returned. The first priority was to rebuild the houses gutted in the blaze.

The problem was that, by now, word had spread about the funds from America. On the night of September 16, 1912, two burglars burst into my grandfather's home and stole the money. They also murdered him and my grandmother, who was pregnant with their third child, beating them to death with an axle wrenched loose from a nearby carriage. Their four-year-old son Meir – my father's older brother – suffered a deep wound from where the attackers drove the metal shaft into his skull. He survived, but carried a golf-ball-sized indentation in his forehead for the rest of his life. My father had burrowed into a corner of the room, and the robbers didn't see him.

The two boys were raised by their grandmother, Itzila. She was a formidable woman. My father's parents had married only in their 30s, later than usual in Jewish communities at the time. This was because my grandfather had been

drafted into the Tsarist army and posted to Siberia. After a couple of years waiting for his assignment to end, Itzila had had enough. She boarded a series of trains and crossed the whole of Russia. She showed up at his base and – though no one in the family ever figured out how – brought him back home. Now, she was determined to ensure that his murder would not deny his two surviving sons as normal a life as she could give them.

When the First World War broke out, she took the boys 1,500 miles south, ahead of the advancing German army, to Simferopol in the Crimea. Initially under Tsarist rule, then the Bolsheviks, and from late 1917 until the end of the war under the Germans, they had to deal with cold, damp, and a chronic shortage of food. My Uncle Meir told me how he would run after German supply carriages and collect the odd apple or potato that fell off the back. He also began taking my father, who had turned six by then, to visit the German soldiers in their barracks. The young conscripts had been wrenched from their own families by the war. They enjoyed the company of the two children, and sometimes gave them cookies or even a loaf of bread. Yet what they really needed were things like milk or meat or fish, and a warm, dry room to sleep in. When Itzila and the boys made it back to Pushelat at the end of the war, my father was diagnosed with the bone-development disease, rickets.

Meir, older and stronger, did not get the illness. But in another way, my father was the more fortunate of the two boys. The wartime years without schooling affected him less than his older brother. Meir never really made up the lost ground in high school. My father simply began his Jewish primary education, *cheder*, a couple of years later than usual. It was an extraordinary cheder. It was run by Rabbi Shlomo Kahaneman, who became head of the Ponovezh yeshivah on Rav Itzele's death after the war. When it was time for my father to enter secondary education, however, he decided against going on to the yeshivah. Meir was preparing to leave for Palestine. My father, not just an orphan but facing the prospect of being brotherless as well, enrolled in the Hebrew-language, Zionist high school.

A number of relatives were living in the United States, including my late grandfather's brother, Jacob, who had left Pushelat and settled in Pittsburgh only months before his murder. When my father was finishing high school, Jacob tried to persuade him to come to America for university. But it was the voice of his older brother that won out. With Meir signing on as his sponsor with the British Mandate authorities for a study visa, he left for Palestine shortly before his twentieth birthday. Jacob did still insist on pitching in with financial

support, which helped allow my father to enroll at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

There were only a few hundred students there at the time. The math and science faculties had yet to be established. My father did well in his studies: literature, history and philosophy. Yet then he abandoned them, after two years. His explanation for not staying on, when I asked him many years later, was that with Zionist pioneers arriving in ever-growing numbers, it felt wrong to spend his days going to lectures, reading books and writing essays. I am sure that he did feel that way. But I also suspect that in the midst of the Great Depression, Uncle Jacob in Pennsylvania was no longer able to provide financial help, or that my father felt no longer able to accept it. I also got the sense that, despite the fact he had been reunited with Meir, he still felt cut off, lonely.

When he began looking around for a way to become part of the gathering momentum towards a state, Mishmar Hasharon didn't yet exist. Its founding core consisted of a dozen Russian pioneers, ten boys and two girls. They began by working in one of the kibbutzim in the north, in order to get the experience needed to set up their new settlement. A few years later, they returned to Herzliya, near Tel Aviv. Working on other settlements in the area until they found a place to start their kibbutz, they were joined by a group of arrivals from Poland. They included several young men and women who, though a year or two older than my father, had been with him at the Hebrew high school in Pushelat.

In the autumn of 1932, he went to visit his old school friends for a weekend. There were several dozen youngsters around the Sabbath dinner table. Typically for kibbutzniks, there was no religious ritual, but instead a medley of pioneer songs set to the music of old Russian folk tunes. The modest fare was prepared communally, in their small kitchen. He must have felt warmed by a sense of a wider family. Within a few weeks, he decided to join them. Several months later, the Jewish National Fund purchased about 2,000 acres from an Arab landowner near Wadi Khawaret. The area was set aside for three new Jewish settlements: a moshav called Kfar Haim, where the land was divided into individual plots, and two kibbutzim. One was called Ma'abarot. The other, right next to it, was Mishmar Hasharon.

My father was among seventy youngsters who set off to build Mishmar Hasharon. They arrived in three trucks with everything they figured they'd need to turn the hard, scrubby hill into a kibbutz. At first they slept in tents, a dozen of them in each. They built the core of the settlement from pre-fab kits: small

wooden structures to sleep in, and a slightly larger one for the dining hall. They dug a well and ordered a pump from Tel Aviv, at first for drinking and washing, but soon allowing them to set up a dairy with a dozen cows; a chicken coop with a few hundred hens; and, finally, to plant their first orange grove and a small vineyard.

When my mother arrived in 1935, the kibbutz was up and running. Still, there were not enough citrus trees, vines, cattle and chickens to occupy a membership which now numbered more than 200. My father, like many of the others, worked outside the kibbutz. They put their earnings into the communal pot. In the mid-1930s, he was part of a platoon of tractors that helped level the dunes south of Tel Aviv for the new coastal town of Holon. On his way back, he would stop at the central post office in Tel Aviv to pick up letters and packages for the rest of the kibbutz – including Yaakov Margulit's love letters to my mother. That was how my parents' friendship began. And how, a few years later, she decided to spurn her Gordonia suitor in favor of Srulik Brog, the postman.

It was not until 1939 that he and my mother moved in together, sharing one of Mishmar Hasharon's tiny bedrooms. It was the kibbutz equivalent of a commitment ceremony. They didn't bother getting married until midway through 1941, calling on the services of a British Mandate official rather than a rabbi. Perhaps because this was less than nine months before I was born, my mother always remained vague when she was asked their exact wedding date.

My parents were like parts of a patchwork quilt: an unlikely pairing in many ways, but somehow fitting together. As Zionists, they were very different. My mother was a passionate believer in the grand social experiment of kibbutz life. She was ready to put aside all her individual interests for the common good, and expected others to do the same. She believed that under the umbrella of the kibbutz, ordinary human selfishness would simply melt away. The highly motivated Gordonia settlers – my mothers' group, and a series of others that followed over the next few years – soon formed the core of the political and social identity of Mishmar Hasharon, and my mother played an active part.

My father was more detached from the ideological side of the kibbutz and, as I got older, was sometimes critical of it. He was also quieter than my mother, more contemplative, and less assertive. In fact, it was only through Uncle Meir that by the time I was born, he had moved on from driving a tractor to a more important role on the kibbutz. Meir visited us every few weeks throughout my childhood. Ever since his arrival in Palestine, he had been working for the

Palestine Electric Company. When Mishmar Hasharon installed its own electricity system, the PEC was in overall charge of the project. Uncle Meir began training my father, and then put him forward as the logical kibbutz contact for installing, maintaining and repairing the equipment.

My father did have an affinity, and a fascination, for such work. He was a natural tinkerer, a problem-solver. He had an insatiable intellectual curiosity, especially about anything relating to science or engineering. Once the electric system was installed, he was given responsibility for managing any aspect of the kibbutz which involved electricity: the water pumps, the irrigation system, the communal laundry and, some years later, the replacement of the original bakery by a larger, industrial-size facility.

However different my parents were, they appreciated each other's particular talents. My father was constantly on call to oversee some new installation, or to make sure that breakdowns in the old ones got sorted out. My mother's initial "day job" was in the children's nursery. Having helped her mother raise her younger siblings back in Warsaw, she had a real gift for caring for young children. Her role soon evolved and expanded. She became the main authority in the kibbutz on all issues related to childbirth and early childcare.

Still, I can never my parents showing physical affection in our presence. None of the grown-ups did. This was part of an unspoken kibbutz code of individual self-restraint. Outward displays of emotion were seen as softness, a kind of selfishness which risked undermining communal discipline, tenacity and strength. Because I had known no other way, this emotional restraint did not strike me as odd when I was a child. Only in recent years have I come to see that it had a lasting effect on me – not because I felt less loved, or doubted my parents' love for each other, but in my own lifelong uneasiness about showing my feelings outside of my family and a close circle of friends. During my years in the army, that didn't matter too much. But in the political arena, I'm sure it was a handicap. Glad-handing, backslapping and general schmoozing may not be absolutely necessities in politics. But they are certainly assets. To my rivals, and sometimes my allies, my natural reticence sometimes came over as coldness or, even more frustratingly, as arrogance. Happily, my life experiences since then, not least becoming a grandfather, have begun to soften my kibbutznik edges.

I did get much that I value enormously from each of my parents. From my mother, her seemingly effortless focus on causes larger than herself, her sense of duty and commitment, and her visceral sense that politics *mattered*. Also her

love for literature. When I would come home from the children's house to my parent's room – just nine-feet- by-10, so small that their "bed" consisted of two mattresses propped against the wall during the day – there was often a novel or a book of verse sharing a small table with my parents' most prized single possession: their kibbutz-issue radio.

Still, as a child I spent more time with my father, and I looked on him as my guide, protector and role model. Though it didn't strike me at the time, he was not a large man. As a result of the wartime rickets, he never grew to more than five-foot-four. He weighed barely 150 pounds. He had thinning hair, and went bald when I was about ten. Still, he was a powerful presence, stocky and strong from his work on the kibbutz. He had a deep and resonant voice, a mesmerizing bass, and warm, wise-looking, blue-gray eyes.

Like my mother, he never mentioned the trials which they and their families had endured before arriving in Palestine. They did not speak to me in any detail about the Holocaust. Not even about the death of my mother's parents, or of Itzik and Henya, a loss which she learned about months afterward in a series of increasingly conclusive letters from her sisters in Moscow. No one on the kibbutz spoke to us about the Holocaust in the years immediately after the war. It was as if the thoughts and memories were loose scabs, which they dared not pick at. Maybe they feared that to share them with their children would tempt fate, and deny us the fresh start which they wished for us.

When I was ten or eleven, my father did – once, inadvertently – open a window onto his childhood. Every Saturday, we would listen to a classical music concert on my parents' radio. When Tchaikovsky's violin concerto in D came on, I noticed an extraordinary look come over my father's face. When the music ended, he turned to me and spoke, very quietly, about the train ride he had taken as an infant with Meir and Grandma Itzila in the early days of the First World War. The train took five days to reach the Crimea. It sometimes halted unexpectedly, for hours at a time. But every evening, he said, a man at the far end of their carriage would take out his violin and play the Tchaikovsky concerto.

I have heard the piece in concert halls many times since. When the orchestra begins the second movement – with the violin notes climbing higher, then trembling ever so subtly – it sends a shiver down my spine. I can't help thinking of the crowded railway car in which my then four-year-old father and the other Jews of Pushelat escaped the Great War of 1914. And of other trains, in another war 25 years later, carrying Jews not to safety but to the death camps.

Even as a child, music moved me. Listening to the concert program in my parents' room was something I always looked forward to. It was my father who encouraged me, when I was eight, to learn to play the piano. I took lessons four or five times a week, along with seven other of the kibbutz children of different ages. When we got old enough, we took turns playing a short piece – the kibbutz equivalent of an opening prayer – at the Friday-night meal in the dining hall. I kept up with my lessons throughout my childhood, until I left for the army. I have always cherished my ability to play. Sitting down at the piano and immersing myself in Tchaikovsky or Mozart or Chopin is something I've never ceased to find calming, uplifting, liberating. Even as Prime Minister, when I was waiting to meet Yasir Arafat at a European conference in an old Spanish castle, or at a make-or-break stage in my Camp David summit with Arafat and President Bill Clinton.

* * *

My most vivid early memory from Mishmar Hasharon is of British soldiers. They were Scottish, actually. I was not yet four on that bright autumn afternoon in 1945. But I can still see myself, sitting on the ground and peering up at the knee-socks and kilts. The army band was touring towns and villages near Tel Aviv to celebrate, a few months late, the end of the Second World War in Europe.

At that point in my life, I spent most of my waking hours in the happy company of my several dozen kibbutz "siblings" – in the children's home, in the dining hall, running through the open spaces in the center of the kibbutz, or along its still-unpaved pathways, with our *metapelet*. She would often take us through the orange groves in the afternoon. Or sometimes, across the main road, to the Arab village.

Wadi Khawaret was a cluster of a few dozen concrete homes, built back from a main street bordered by shops and storehouses. She would buy us sweets in the little grocery store, which was rich with the aroma of nuts and fruits and spices. I remember the man behind the counter as having a kindly, weathered face and a dark moustache. Dressed in a long, gray *galabiya* and a black-and-white keffiyeh, he would smile when we came in. There was always a group of Palestinian women, in full-length robes, seated on stoops outside. Some were breastfeeding their babies. We saw cattle, bulls, even the odd buffalo, being led

to or from the fields. I was struck that these people were different from us: the way they looked, dressed, lived, worked, and fed their babies. Even their *chickens* looked different: deep brown with patches of red and gold. Not like the white chickens on the kibbutz, which were never outside their wire coops.

I felt no hostility, certainly no hatred, toward us in the village. The people seemed warm and easygoing with one another, and benignly indifferent to the dozen Jewish toddlers and their *metapelet*. Our own attitude to Wadi Khawaret – or at least mine, as a four-year-old – was of benign curiosity. I certainly did not imagine that within a couple of years we and they would be on opposite sides of a war. I enjoyed these visits, just as I enjoyed every other part of my early childhood. Each age-group on the kibbutz was given a name, like a scout troop in America or England. Ours was called *dror*. It was the Hebrew word for "freedom".

But "*dror*" was not just the word for freedom. Although no one said this to us kids at the time, it had been chosen because it was also the name of one of the Jewish youth movements in the Warsaw Ghetto, teenage heroes from the doomed uprising against the Nazis. And little by little, from about the age of five, I became more aware of the suffering the Jews had so recently endured, the growing tension around us, and the sense that something momentous was about to happen as the prospect of a state got closer.

The memories remain, like a series of snapshots. One was from a Saturday morning at the end of June 1946. Standing with my parents outside the door of their room, I watched as British soldiers returned to Mishmar Hasharon and other kibbutzim around the country. This time, they had weapons rather than bagpipes. In what became known in Zionist lore as "Black Saturday", they arrested dozens of Haganah leaders. A curfew was imposed, and everyone was told to stay indoors. But around noon, a few of the youngest children ventured outside. We went up to the British soldiers standing guard in the center of the kibbutz. They were tall, tanned and slim. One of them lifted me up on his shoulder. None of them spoke Hebrew, but they had obviously come armed to charm: they began handing out chocolates and other candy to me and my *Dror* mates.

There were no Haganah leaders on our kibbutz, as the British troops must have quickly concluded. But like the other kibbutzim, we did have a *slik*, a hidden store of World War One-vintage rifles, pistols and ammunition. The soldiers didn't find it. Only a couple of people on the kibbutz knew it existed. As the years passed, even they seemed to forget. Or if they did remember, they

took the secret to their graves. It wasn't until a few years ago that it was rediscovered, by a new generation of Mishmar Hasharon children. They noticed a trap door in a barn on the edge of the kibbutz, which was used in the early years to fatten the calves for milking.

It was on a spring morning in 1947 that I got my first real sense that the Jewish state might have to be fought for. I got a close-up look at the elite of the Zionist militias, the Palmach. Across the country, the Palmach numbered something like 6,000, a sizable chunk of a pre-state force which, with the Haganah and other smaller groups, totaled barely 40,000. The Palmachniks were deeply motivated, sophisticated political activists. They spent almost as much time discussing and debating as they did planning for missions. They had no fixed base. Each unit would spend five or six months at a time on various kibbutzim. For the first two weeks of each month, they would earn their keep by working in the fields. They spent the other two weeks training.

I had just turned five when I watched a dozen Palmach youngsters rappel down the side of our concrete security building. The wall was only 25 or 30 feet high, but it looked like a skyscraper from my perch on the patch of grass in front. And the feat of these trim young Jewish men and women seemed to me nothing short of heroic.

A few months later, on a Saturday afternoon in November 1947, I crowded into my parents' room as the Haganah radio station in Tel Aviv crackled out its account of a United Nations General Assembly debate on the future of Palestine. The session was the outcome of a long train of events, starting with Britain's acknowledgement, a decade earlier, that its League of Nations mandate to rule over Palestine was unsustainable. The British had since proposed a series of longer-term arrangements for accommodating both Arab and Jewish aspirations. Now, the newly established United Nations was meeting to consider the idea of passing control of Palestine to two new states: one Arab and the other Jewish.

Since the partition plan was based on existing areas of Arab and Jewish settlement, the proposed Jewish state was a decidedly anemic, disconnected entity. It was shaped a bit like a boomerang, with a long, narrow center along the Mediterranean coast. Jerusalem, the site of the ancient Jewish temple, was not part of it. It would be placed under international rule. By no means all of the Zionist leaders were happy with partition. There was strong opposition on the left from Yitzhak Tabenkin's *Achdut ha Avodah*, the political patrons of the Palmach; and from the right-wing Revisionist followers of Menachem Begin,

who inherited the political mantle of the recently deceased Jabotinsky. Both right and left saw a need for a Jewish state in all of Palestine. Yet Ben-Gurion and the pragmatic Zionist mainstream argued that UN endorsement of a Jewish state – no matter what its borders, even beside a new Palestinian Arab state – would represent a historic victory.

The proceedings were taking place in a Long Island village called Lake Success, then the temporary home of the UN. They went on for hours. Though the broadcast was in Hebrew, I only loosely understood the details. But that they mattered, I could tell by looking at the eyes of my parents, riveted on the radio. At sundown, I had to go back to the children's home. But we were woken up before dawn, to join in the celebrations. The vote for partition – for the Jewish state Herzl had first dreamed of 50 years earlier – had been won. A bonfire blazed in front of the bakery, and all around us the grown-ups were shouting, singing and dancing.

Yet every one of the Arab delegations at Lake Success had voted against partition. They opposed *any* Jewish state, no matter what its shape, even with a new Arab state alongside it. Though the plan was intended to take effect only after the British left in May 1948, violence erupted the very next day. An attack by on a bus near Lydda, on the central plain of Palestine near the road up to Jerusalem, left six Jews dead and nine injured. Similar attacks occurred all over the country. Shooting also broke out in mixed Arab-and-Jewish towns and cities: Jaffa, on the southern edge of Tel Aviv; and Safed, Tiberius and Haifa in the north. And, of course, in and around Jerusalem.

I followed all this, with a mix of curiosity and trepidation, through my halting attempts to read *Davar le Yeladim*, the weekly children's edition of the Labour Zionist newspaper *Davar*; the comments of my parents and others on the kibbutz; and our Sabbath gatherings around the radio. We young children felt an additional, personal connection with what was going on. One of our *Dror* housemates, a boy named Giora Ros a few months older than me, had left Mishmar Hasharon the year before, when his father took a job with the bus company in Jerusalem. As the battle for the city raged through the end of 1947 and into 1948, its Jewish residents were under siege. We sent packages of clothing to Giora, and food, too, which we would save by eating only half of an egg at breakfast, and smaller portions at dinner.

The mood darkened further at the end of January 1948, four months before the British were due to leave. A cluster of West Bank settlements known as Gush Etzion, about 10 miles south of Jerusalem near the hills of Bethlehem, had

been under siege for weeks. The area was to have been part of the new Arab state. For a time, Haganah commanders considered evacuating the settlements. But the Arabs had refused partition. Given Gush Etzion's strategic importance in defending the besieged Jews of Jerusalem, a decision was taken to try to hold on to it, despite attacks not just from local Arab gunmen but the Jordanian army as well.

Resupply convoys were being regularly ambushed. Shortly before midnight on January 15, 1948, a special unit of Haganah youngsters set off on foot to try to break through to Gush Etzion. Led by a 24-year-old named Danny Mass, they became known as "The 35". In Hebrew, the *Lamed Hey*. They were bright, committed Zionists. One of them, named Tuvia Kushnir, was carving out a reputation as one of pre-state Israel's leading botanists. Yet with only one exception, a recent immigrant who had fought with the American army in the war, they were novice soldiers.

They marched through the night. But when the sun rose, they were still a couple of miles from Gush Etzion. They were spotted, surrounded and attacked. Though they fought back, it was hopeless. They ran out of ammunition. By the end of the afternoon, all of them were dead. The British authorities, leaning hard on the leaders of the nearby Arab villages, did recover the bodies. Every one had been battered, burned or broken. In some cases, the dead men's genitals had been hacked off and shoved into their mouths. Since I was still a few weeks short of my sixth birthday, I was spared that detail. But not the sense of horror over what had happened to The 35, nor the central message: the lengths, and depths, to which the Arabs of Palestine were ready to go in order to keep us from having a state. "*Hit'alelu bagufot!*" was the only slightly sanitized account we children were given. "They mutilated the corpses!"

Even after the murder of The 35, Ben-Gurion insisted the Hagnah and the Palmach refrain from going on the attack. He feared this might prod the British to intervene on the side of the Arabs. He ordered our units to limit themselves to defending key roads, and escorting supply convoys or other vehicles. The one exception was in the mixed cities. There, he understood that for the Jewish population to survive, our forces would have to be able to retaliate against Arab attacks.

All this changed, however, in the early spring of 1948, after the American delegate to the UN proposed abandoning the idea of partition in favor of a UN trusteeship over all of Palestine. If accepted, that meant there would be no Jewish state when the British left. Ben-Gurion was not prepared to run that risk.

He also knew that the surrounding Arab states had publicly vowed to send their forces into Palestine. So at the beginning of April, he told the Haganah to go on the offensive. The aim was to take control of the territory allocated to a Jewish state under partition, as well as the isolated Jewish settlements outside that area. The April offensive was the real start of what became our War of Independence. Or, as the Arabs called it, *Al Naqba*, the "catastrophe" of 1948. It was when the first tens of thousands of Arabs began to flee the escalating violence in Palestine.

Statehood was still not a given. Just a couple of days before the British were set to leave, Ben-Gurion convened his *de facto* cabinet to decide on another American proposal. Secretary of State George C. Marshall wanted a three-month delay in declaring the state, during which there would be a cease-fire. Marshall's judgement was that this was in our own interest. He thought there was a real risk we would be defeated by the Arab armies. Marshall was not just a diplomat, but a general, America's chief of staff during the war. His assessment could not simply be dismissed. Yet Ben-Gurion was sure any delay in establishing the state would risk ending the prospect altogether. By a margin of a single vote, he managed to push his view through.

On the afternoon of May 14, 1948, the state was declared. The ceremony at which the Declaration of Independence was read out was held in the Tel Aviv museum. The time and venue were kept secret, in case the British tried to delay the move, or Arab forces attacked to preempt it. But it was broadcast live by the Haganah station, itself now renamed as *Kol Yisrael*, the Voice of Israel.

Hours later, the Arab armies began crossing into Palestine.

* * *

Now that full-scale war had begun, my father helped me to chart each victory and setback, the periodic truces and new offensives, on a little map. A few months into the war, my mother even took me along with her to Tel Aviv for a parade of Israel's armed forces. It was held on July 27, the 20th day of the Jewish month of Tamuz. It was the anniversary of the death of Herzl and, at the time, Israel's "national day". In 1948, it was also one week into the latest of a series of cease-fires with the armies of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, or as it was then called, Transjordan.

My mother had been invited to watch the parade by a childhood friend who had a second-floor apartment at the top end of Ben Yehuda Street, one of the main avenues running parallel to the sea. When she asked whether I'd like to come with her, I reacted like any six-and-a-half-year-old. "Yes," I said. *Betach!*" Of course! Tel Aviv was then just a few decades old. But nearly 230,000 people, more than a third of the new state's Jewish population, lived there. I had seen pictures of it in *Davar*. I'd seen moving pictures of it, too. Once a week, the entire population of Mishmar Hasharon – a more modest 300 or so at this stage – gathered to watch an American or British movie, outside in the summer and in the dining hall when the weather turned cooler. Before the film, there was always a Hebrew-language newsreel in which Tel Aviv, Ben-Gurion's political base and the headquarters of the military command, featured prominently.

Many of Tel Aviv's buildings – the small, simple apartment blocs and the Bauhaus structures designed by Jewish architects who had fled Germany and Austria – looked the same then as they do now. But the trees bordering the main streets were younger, and smaller. So I had a clear view when I joined my mother, her friend, and a couple of older guests on a small balcony to watch the parade. Crowds lined both sides of the street. A couple of ordinary passenger cars drove by first, to make sure the way was clear. Then came a military band. It was followed by successive units – a few dozen men or women in each – from all the branches of Israel's fledgling armed forces. Next came an assortment of other vehicles: ammunition carts, a boxy-looking armored car, army and navy jeeps, and finally an elongated command car, with outsized rubber tires, which looked to me more like a boat. The procession took about 45 minutes. We left for the kibbutz about a half-hour later, once the crowds had thinned out. When we got back, the other children peppered me with questions about the parade, and about Tel Aviv. With appropriately restrained kibbutz pride, I shared every detail.

Dozens of kibbutzim around the country were in the line of fire. Some had fallen: around Jerusalem, Beit Ha'arava and all of Gush Etzion, which was overrun the day before the state was declared and where dozens of Jews were killed even after they had surrendered. In the south, Kfar Dorom, Yad Mordechai and Nitzanim were taken by the Egyptians. Mishmar ha Yarden in the north was captured by the Syrians. Other kibbutzim barely managed to hang on, after fierce fighting and heavy losses. Even near us, just five miles east, Kibbutz Hama'apil had to fight off an Iraqi force from the adjacent Arab village of Qaqun.

But not Mishmar Hasharon. If it hadn't been for the radio, the weekly newsreels, and the little map on which I charted its course with my father, I would not have known a war was going on. The closest we got to involvement in the conflict was a makeshift landing strip a half-mile to the west. It was built to accommodate Israel's first combat aircraft, Messerschmitts, acquired from Czechoslovakia. I remember watching rapt as these twin-propeller planes would roar down over the lone tree in front of my parents' room, flying so low that I could pick out every detail on their landing gear and wing flaps as they swooped in to land.

One Arab army did get near to us: the Iraqis, in Qaqun. Indeed, if they had advanced just seven or eight miles further, they could have overrun Mishmar Hasharon, reached Netanya on the coast, and cut the new Jewish state in half. I can still remember the rumble of what sounded like thunder one morning in June 1948, as the Alexandroni Brigade, one of twelve in the new Israeli army, launched its decisive attack on the Iraqis. "No reason to worry," our *metapelet* kept assuring me. "No need to be afraid." That only made me more scared, of course. Within hours, however, all was quiet again.

A few weeks later, I heard the only gunfire inside the kibbutz itself. It came from the top of the water tower. Ya'akov Margailt, by now one of the leaders of the kibbutz, was on guard duty, with the heaviest weapon in our arsenal, a German-made World War Two machine gun. He thought he had seen movement on the road outside the kibbutz. But as he explained a bit sheeplishly in the dining hall that afternoon, it turned out to be nothing.

Still, around the country, the war raged on. It wasn't until well into 1949 that formal agreements were signed, and "armistice line" borders drawn, with the neighboring Arab states: with Egypt in February, Lebanon in March, Jordan at the beginning of April and the Syrians in late July. By the only measure that mattered – survival, and the securing of the new state – Israel had won. Jordan did end up in control of the West Bank, as well as the eastern half of a divided city of Jerusalem, including the walled Old City and the site of the ancient temple. As a result, Israel was just 11 miles wide around Tel Aviv and even narrower, barely eight miles, near Netanya and Mishmar Hasharon. Egyptian-held Gaza was seven miles from the southern city of Ashkelon and just 40 miles from the outskirts of Tel Aviv.

Still, by capturing dozens of Arab towns and villages in the coastal plain to the east of Tel Aviv, Israeli forces had prevented the new state's "narrow waist" from being even smaller. They had also won control of the entire north up to the

pre-war borders with Lebanon and Syria, as well as the Negev Desert in the south. The territory of the new state was about one-third larger than the area proposed under the UN partition plan rejected by the Arabs. Yet the victory had come at a heavy price: more than 6,000 dead, about one per cent of the Jewish population of Palestine at the time. It was as if America had lost two million people in the Vietnam War, more than 30 times the actual toll. One-third of the Israeli dead were Holocaust survivors, smuggled into Palestine after 1945.

The Arabs had paid a heavy price too, and not just the roughly 7,000 people who lost their lives. More than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs had fled – or, in some cases, been forced to flee – their towns and villages in what was now the State of Israel.

The full extent, and circumstances, of the Arabs' flight became known to us only later. But it did not take long to notice the change immediately around us. Wadi Khawaret was physically still there. But the villagers were gone. As far as I could discover, none of them, thankfully, had been killed. They had left with the first wave of refugees in April 1948, initially to the Arab village of Shweika five miles further inland, and then to Tulkarem on the West Bank. After the war, the Israeli government divided up their farmland, and Shweika's, among nearby kibbutzim, including Mishmar Hasharon.

Though I had no reason to wish any ill for our former neighbors in Wadi Khawaret, their sudden absence seemed to me at the time simply a part of the war. From the moment the violence had started, I understood there would be suffering, on both sides. When we sent our care packages to Giora Ros in besieged Jerusalem, I remember trying to imagine what "living under a siege" would feel like. I hardly dared ask myself what would happen if it succeeded. Yet especially after the murder and the mutilation of The 35, I assumed the war would come down to a simple calculus. If there was going to be an Israel – even, maybe, if there was going to be a Mishmar Hasharon – we would have to win. The Arabs would have to lose.

At first, even the fact that our kibbutz had now been given a share of the land of Wadi Khawaret and Shweika – more than doubling our size – seemed to me just another product of the war. After all, Ben-Gurion had accepted the plan for two states. It was the Arabs who had said no, deciding to fight instead. Now that their villages were empty, *someone* had to farm the land. So why not us?

Yet other events after the war did lead me to begin questioning how faithful we were to the Zionist ideals I was being taught on the kibbutz. The Palestinians

were not the only refugees created by the 1948 war. An almost equal number of Jews, more than 600,000, fled *into* Israel: from the overrun settlements on the West Bank and, in far greater numbers, from Arab countries where they had lived for generations. More than 100,000 were forced out of Iraq. Several hundred thousand more came from Morocco and Tunisia in north Africa. Immediately after the war, about 50,000 were airlifted out of Yemen on the Arabian peninsula, where they had endured a series of violent attacks since the partition vote. The Yemeni airlift was kept secret until it was over. But it was hailed as a validation of the Zionist vision of a state in which all Jews could feel welcome and secure, and which all Jews could call their home.

The reality that greeted the Yemenis was more complex. Most were initially settled in tented transit camps. I'm not sure how several dozen Yemeni families made their way to Wadi Khawaret. But the village itself lay empty, except for several buildings which we and other kibbutzim were using for storage and for our transport co-operative. The Yemenis moved into the vacant homes. Then, a few nights later, a posse of young men – half from Ma'abarot, and half from Mishmar Hasharon – descended on them and, armed with clubs and thick wooden staves, drove them out.

I was shocked. I had seen the photos in *Davar le Yeladim* celebrating the airlift. The Yemeni newcomers were pictured in Arab dress. They reminded me a bit of the villagers of Wadi Khawaret. But the men wore *kippot*, Jewish skullcaps, and some of the boys had long sidecurls. Looking exhausted but elated, they crouched on the airport tarmac and kissed the ground of their new country. Now, however, for the simple "crime" of moving into a row of empty buildings in search of a decent place to live, they had been beaten up and chased away. By *us*. The "pioneers" of Zionism. I realized Wadi Khawaret no longer belonged to the Arabs. I wasn't sure who it really belonged to. Maybe the Israeli government. But, surely, our kibbutz had no more right to the buildings than the Jews who had fled from Yemen, and who obviously needed them a lot more than we did.

For days, I tried to discover who from Mishmar Hasharon had joined the vigilante attack. Though everyone seemed to know what had happened, no one would talk about it. When I asked my father, he looked uncomfortable. He said he guessed it was "some of the young men". In the dining hall the next day, I ran my eyes over all the boys in their late teens and early 20s. I was sure that, after something like this, there had to be some sign of who had done it. But they looked the same as before, eating and talking as if nothing had happened.

The Yemenis did not just need places to live. They needed jobs, and that soon led to a further challenge for Mishmar Hasharon. The core of the kibbutz's ethos was that we would live from our own labor. Yet no less a figure than Ben-Gurion insisted that we and other kibbutzim help provide work for the Yemenis. We first hired them when I was about ten, the age at which kibbutz children started working in the fields. At first, we worked for an hour at a time. Over a period of several years, that grew to two hours and then three, as we became a full part of the work force. We found ourselves alongside several dozen Yemeni women, who lived a few miles north in a *maabarah*, a transit settlement, which evolved into a town called Elyakhin. Each morning, the Yemenis arrived in a bus, and they left at the end of their day's work.

I don't know whether I expected to feel a Gordonian sense of joy, a personal transformation, when I began working in the fields. Our first assignment was to sow grain in long parallel rows. We were told not just to toss in the seeds in bunches, but space them out, a half-dozen seeds at a time, a couple of inches apart. But as I watched the rest of the team – the other children and the Yemeni women, who ranged from their late teens to late 30s – what I really felt was more mundane. Heat. Fatigue. Boredom. A sense that this was just a job to be done. To make the time pass, I began to think of it as a competition. Each of us started together, tossing the seeds in furrows stretching to the end of the field. The point, obviously, was to do it right. But I found it more interesting to see who finished first, and how much longer it seemed to take the rest of us.

The same worker always led the way, by some distance. She was a Yemeni, in her early thirties. Her name was Baddura. Short and stocky, with dark curly hair, she seemed naturally deft at farm work. I never heard her complain. She was nearly always smiling, no matter what our task, whether sowing seeds or picking oranges and grapefruit and lemons, potatoes or peppers, tomatoes, even cotton. When I remarked to her how much better, and faster, she was than the rest of us, she laughed. Physically, I was a small boy. I looked more like a seven- or eight-year-old. But I guess she could see I was eager to excel. She took me under her wing. The next day, we were picking tomatoes. "Do the row next to mine," she told me. Working alongside her, watching the grace with which she moved, made it easier. I thought to myself that it was like playing an especially hard piece on the piano. The secret was to achieve a kind of unthinking fluidity, by focusing on the passage one or two ahead of the one you were playing. Physically, Baddura was stronger than me. Before long, however, I was finishing my sowing or reaping a good ten yards head of the other kids, and not too far behind her.

There was no time to talk while working in the fields. But when summer came, with the break from school, we began spending almost the full day picking grapes. We spent our half-hour break at noontime in the half-open asbestos structure where the grapes were packaged for market. Then, there was time to talk, not only to the other kids, but to Baddura. She was a woman of few words, but would occasionally speak about her own children, especially when one of them was ill, or her husband, who had found work in Netanya. I was still some years away from being able to process what I was hearing as part of any coherent set of political views. But I did realize that no matter how rudimentary the creature comforts in Mishmar Hasharon, our existence was a lot easier than hers.

Though Baddura and the other Yemenis worked in our fields every day, they were not members of the kibbutz. Though they were Jews, Israelis, like us, they were paid a flat day-rate. Though they were by far the most productive of the workers, they got no share of what we produced or possessed. A few years later, I raised this issue at one of the weekly *aseifa* meetings, only to be told that we had never wanted to employ outsiders in the first place. It was only because we were part of Ben-Gurion's political movement that we felt unable to refuse. I'm sure that was true, but it seemed to me an incomplete answer, and an evasion.

It was an accidental glance up from picking carrots which focused in my mind the vague sense of unfairness I felt. We were working on a tract of about seven acres of rich, dark soil on the far side of Ma'abarot, where we grew not just carrots, but tomatoes and potatoes and eggplants. I think I was 11 or 12 by then. As on every other day, we had assembled near the kibbutz garage in the morning. We piled on to a flatbed trailer, a dozen kibbutz kids and the several dozen Yemeni women, Baddura among them. We were towed by a tractor driven by a man named Yankele. He was in his mid-40s, a couple of years older than my father, and was one of the original group at Mishmar Hasharon.

Before the Yemenis came, he had worked, like others in the kibbutz, planting and harvesting. Now, he was responsible for managing the Yemeni workers, which meant he paced among them every half-hour or so to make sure the work was going smoothly. The area was ankle-deep in mud during in the winter, but in the summer it was hot and dusty. I had been working for an hour or so, crouching alongside Baddura, when I looked up. On the edge of the field, under a big clump of banana trees, I saw Yankele. He looked like a character in one of the American films from our weekly movie-and-newsreel evenings. He

had a big set of keys on a metal chain. He was nonchalantly twirling them around his finger, first one way, then the other, as his eyes tracked the Yemenis.

Like a kibbutznik-turned-plantation-owner.

* * *

I suppose it is conceivable I could have grown up, like many of my friends in Mishmar Hasharon, to be a kibbutznik: working in the fields and the fruit groves, driving a tractor or a produce truck. Yet as I got older, my mind was drawn in other directions.

As a February baby, I was the youngest in our age group. Even had I gone to a town or city school, that might still have been true. But in the tiny world of our kibbutz, there were not enough kids to organize separate classes for each year. When I began school, I was five-and-a-half. Most of the other children in my class were six. Some were seven, and one had already turned eight.

Maybe it was this age pressure, or maybe something inside me. But from the outset, I had an avid thirst for knowledge. By age six, I was able to read Hebrew without *nikkud* – the diacritical marks used to denote vowel sounds, which help children learn the language. It took a few years for me to graduate from *Davar le Yeladim* to the grown-up edition of the newspaper. Yet I began reading books, even if I could not yet fully understand them. By the time I was seven or eight, I was burying myself in volumes of the children's encyclopedia at the kibbutz library, where I tried to untangle the mysteries of outer space, or the internal combustion engine, or the creation of worldly wonders, from the Hanging Gardens of Babylon to the Empire State Building and the Golden Gate Bridge.

At first, I got many of the answers from my father. In my afternoon visits home, and especially on Saturday mornings, we would walk around the kibbutz as I plied him with what must have seemed an endless array of questions. How come the moon wasn't always round? How did anyone *know* that the sabertooth tigers I'd seen "pictured" in the encyclopedia actually existed? And where were they now?

He was incredibly patient. It was not until years later that I asked him about his memory of that terrible night of killing in Pushelat. His reply was that he

had no memory of it at all. He'd been barely two. He saw nothing. Anything he "knew" had come from what others told him when he was older. I do still wonder, however, whether it was in part because he'd never known his own parents that he always seemed so comfortable talking with children, his own and others. He never talked down to them. He engaged with them as little adults in the making.

There is not a single question I asked that he did not at least try to answer. On one of our walks, when I was nine or ten, he took me to see the first water pump on the kibbutz. It was an incredibly intricate contraption, at least to my eyes. It looked like a Prohibition Era still, only more colorful, with a pair of blue pipes arching over a tank-and-pump assembly painted bright red. I watched as he disassembled the casing, then the power unit, which had a big screw-like element in the middle. He explained how centrifugal force worked, how the screw helped bring up the water. I kept asking questions. How was it designed? How was it *made*? A few months later, he took me to the factory near Tel Aviv where the pumps were manufactured.

There were other teaching moments as well. After the world war, when survivors from the Holocaust began being smuggled into Palestine, one of the places they landed was Kfar Vitkin, a few miles from Mishmar Hasharon. We called these unexpected arrivals, simply, "new immigrants". When a few dozen would suddenly appear at mealtime in the dining hall, hollow-eyed and gaunt in ill-fitting kibbutz clothes, it was understood even by the youngest of us that we should not ask too many questions. Most of the overnight arrivals were quickly moved on to other towns or settlements around the country. But a few stayed on. I couldn't help noticing one woman, named Anka – in her late 20s, though she looked much older – leaving the dining hall each day with a full loaf of bread under her arm. I couldn't figure it out. There were shortages of many things on the kibbutz in those first years. But with our bakery, we *always* had bread. Why was she doing this? My father looked very serious when I asked him. He did not want to lie to me, but obviously could find no words to describe the horror of the Holocaust to a son who had only just turned four. "With what she has endured in her life, before she came here," he said, "she can never be certain that there will be bread."

My father was different not just from my mother, but from most of the other grown-ups on the kibbutz. He was one of perhaps a half-dozen with a university education. Despite leaving early, he'd fulfilled enough of the requirements to get his Hebrew University degree. He, and this informal circle of the bookish,

talked incessantly: about current events, science, inventions, history. *Ideas*. I remember one of them, Mordechai Bauer, who had a masters in law from Germany and was the acknowledged expert on all juridical questions, enthusing about the philosophical writings of Arthur Schopenhauer. Despite the kibbutz's divorce from religious practice, another in the group spoke about the "the beautiful intricacies" of the words of the Bible.

I was a contemplative, at times dreamy, child. We younger children had our own corner of the dining room, where we would come after our first school lesson in the morning for a half-hour breakfast. There were always a few copies of *Davar* on a table next to the piano. One morning when I was nine, I noticed a picture of a German V-2 rocket on the front page, beside a photo of Werner Von Braun, one of the scientific brains behind the weapon with which Hitler had pounded London and other allied cities in the war. Von Braun, co-opted by the Americans after the war, was now talking about the possibilities of human flight to the moon, which was what the *Davar* story was about. I was so engrossed in imagining how that might happen that, lost in thought and sipping my glass of milk long after the rest of the children had left, I had to be tapped on the shoulder by the man clearing the tables and told to hurry back to join them.

Our *metapelet,* from when I was three until the age of eight, was named Bina. She was the wife of the Mordechai Bauer, the Schopenhauer enthusiast, and the mother of twin boys a year or so younger than me. She was more handsome than beautiful, with loosely curled dark hair. But she was full of warmth. She was especially kind to me, which was no doubt one reason I felt the effects of my collective upbringing less dramatically than some other kibbutz children.

To my embarrassment, and hers, she also gave me my first lesson in adult female anatomy. When I was five, she strolled with me one spring evening across the kibbutz, to the far side of the bakery. As the sun set, she said she had to go somewhere, but that I should return to the dining room and that she'd rejoin me there. Though it was only a couple of hundred yards away, as darkness fell I lost my bearings. I wandered back toward the bakery. I spotted a building nearby with three bright shafts of light. I opened the door, only to discover that it was the women's communal showers. Bina was the only one there. Soap dripping from her hair, she was, to put it mildly, startled to see me. Recovering, and covering her body as best she could with her hands, she smiled and said, gently: "Ehud, wait for me outside the door. I'll be there in a minute."

When we were both some years older, she used to like telling a story about my slightly ethereal approach to life when I was in her charge. One winter afternoon, when I was four, she had taken our group onto the gentle rise across the northern edge of the kibbutz, inside Ma'abarot, which at that time of year was full of wildflowers. When she got there, she realized I was missing. Retracing her steps, she found me standing in front of a rock in the middle of the dirt path. "Ehud," she said, "why didn't you come with the rest of us? What are you doing?" I apparently replied: "I'm thinking: which *side* of the rock should I go around?"

Still, important though Bina was as a presence in my life, it was the influence of another figure – another youngster – who mattered more, and for longer. His name was Yigal Garber. In first grade, every child got a "mentor" from one of the older age-groups. Yigal was mine. I was six at the time, and Yigal was twelve. Quick-minded, square-jawed, and with an easy smile, he would go on to become one of the most respected members of the kibbutz.

Though I was the only child he mentored, he was in charge of our entire age-group's extracurricular educational program. It began when I was ten, and he was sixteen. It was a mix of ideological training – the kibbutz equivalent of what my mother had done with her Gordonia friends in Poland – and a scouting course. One evening each week, he would take us for a couple of hours on a *pe'ula* – an "operation". He began by reading us a story or a poem. One which I remember with particular clarity involved a slave who, rather than strive for his freedom, had a nail driven into his ear in hopes of remaining in his master's service forever. He had become enslaved not only in body, but in mind. Another night, he read us an account of a Palmach unit stranded on a hill which they'd just taken, knowing there were anti-personnel mines all around them. The readings were always gripping. And they were always an entry-point for a discussion: how did we understand the story? What were the questions it raised? What would *we* do if faced with a similar choice?

After that part of the evening was over, Yigal walked us in silence into the fields outside the kibbutz. The only sound we heard was the occasional screech of a jackal. He would split us into twos. Each pair would set off from a far edge of the field and have to find the way back. Yigal would station himself at the center. We would have to sneak up on him, and see which of us could get closest without his hearing us approach. In his final year with us before leaving for his army service, he gave each of us a narrow wooden stick and began drilling us in *kapap* – the Hebrew acronym for "face-to-face combat". It had its

roots in the Palmach, which used it for training in the early 1940s when there were not enough rifles to go around. Our course, however, was more like a teenage introduction to martial arts.

I was less interested in that part of the training than in the scouting exercises. Not only was I the youngest in our group. I was still smaller than the rest of them, and, except for a few of the girls, not as strong or as well co-ordinated. I could just about hold my own in our afternoon games of soccer in a scrubby field on the western edge of the kibbutz. But I was hopeless when we moved on to basketball. I could never understand how the others seemed to know exactly where to run on the court, or who to throw the ball to. Also, I could barely manage to get the ball to the basket from the free-throw line. It was an aversion that would last my whole life. During a logjam at the Camp David summit, the Americans organized a pickup game – "basketball diplomacy" – in which some of their negotiators, members of our team and the Palestinians took part. While they played hoops, however, I was playing the piano.

We organized a range of other games on the kibbutz. The ones I enjoyed most had a lot in common with the scouting activities Yigal set for us. They required using not only brawn but brains, to reason out the best way to confront the physical challenges. That approach stayed with me, even after I had grown into my adult body and ended up devoting much of my life to military service. As a special-forces commander, scaling the Golan Heights or mounting an attack in the heart of Beirut, I did need strength and endurance to get in and out alive. By that time in my life, I had both. Yet I would begin each mission by isolating the aim we were trying to achieve, working out the strategy and tactics needed for success, factoring in our own vulnerabilities and what the other side might do to stop us. I would try to anticipate the things that might go wrong and prepare, to the extent we could, to respond to them. In fact, that was also the way I approached political challenges, as Prime Minister.

One of the games we played was in the brackish rectangle of water, about 20 yards long and eight across, we grandly called our swimming pool. Its main function, in fact, was as part of our irrigation system. We called the game "the catchers are coming." We would split into two teams, with five or six kids on each. We began at opposite ends of the pool. Since you could see only a few inches into the water, the idea was for one side to dive underwater and swim near the bottom to the other end, while the "catchers" tried to spot them and tag them.

At first, the advantage was with the catchers. But after a while, I developed a plan. I knew the longer the game went on, the more distracted the catchers would become. They inevitably started the game by trying to predict where our swimmers were headed from how we made our first dive underwater. I settled on using one of three tricks to elude them. I would always begin in a corner of the pool, duck underwater and stay there. Once I figured the catchers were at least at the halfway point, I would swim to the opposite side of the pool and, hugging close to the side wall, make my way to the other end. When I sensed the catchers were expecting that, I'd stay on the same side, and go past them that way. Occasionally, I didn't move at all until I could see the catchers approaching our end of the pool, at which point I'd dart behind them, surface, and swim to the other end.

"Capture the Flag", thankfully, didn't require holding your breath. But again, the need was for a strategy, something that didn't come naturally to eager 10- or 11-year-old kibbutzniks. We would divide our side into several smaller units. Two of them would create diversions, knowing they'd get caught. Once out of the game, although this was not strictly within the rules, they would cluck their tongues, bang a stick against a tree, or whistle, in a signal of where the other side was deployed – allowing our final group to move in and seize the flag.

* * *

I was thirteen when I started seizing other things as well. It began innocently enough, with an overheard conversation between a couple of older kids in the dining hall. They said there was this guy in Gan Shmuel, a kibbutz to the north of us, who had an "amazing" ability. Using a thin strip of metal, he could open locks – even chunky Yale padlocks – in a matter of seconds.

I was intrigued, at first, by the simple mechanical puzzle. It was a feeling no different from when, a year or so earlier, I'd happened on what would become a lasting fascination with the workings of clocks and watches. I was walking with my father when I noticed his watch – a simple rectangle, with Roman numerals for the hours – and asked him how it worked. "I can show you," he said, sitting me down on a bench beside him. He took out his pocket knife and pried off the back. Inside, in contrast to the dirt-caked farm machinery and tractors all around us, were what looked like rose-red jewels set amid miniature flywheels. It was almost like a living thing, a miracle of motion. For months afterward, I took

apart an array of clocks and watches in an effort to work out how they were designed and functioned.

One Saturday afternoon, I turned my investigative powers loose on my parents' alarm clock. Uncle Meir was visiting, and was talking intently to my father as I removed the clock's plastic case. Lying on the floor, I reconnected the clock to the wall socket, figuring I would fiddle around inside to see how it worked. The electric shock jolted me on to my side, and I cried out in a mix of surprise and pain. Uncle Meir wheeled around and, with the same stern look he must have deployed with careless crews at the electric company, bellowed: "Ehud! No! A reckless approach to electric equipment is a recipe for fatalities. I *know*. I've seen more than one." A few minutes later, however, he let me in on a secret. Before coming to Palestine, he had apprenticed as a watch-repairman in Ponovezh. From then on, whenever he visited, we would jointly review my latest efforts at watch disassembly and discovery.

A few months before my thirteenth birthday, he presented me with a little white box. Inside was a watch. A beautiful, modern one, not the kind I'd been tinkering with. In order to get it open – though it never occurred to me to do so – you needed a special watchmakers' tool. The band hung loose on my wrist. But I cherished it, and still do.

Meir's gift, however, was only the second most treasured memory from that day in December 1954. My father's present, though it took the form of words, was even more moving. The occasion was my barmitzvah, the Jewish rite of passage for boys when they reach thirteen. As with Lag b'Omer, the ceremony had been reinterpreted by the kibbutzim, and stripped of religious ritual. Our whole age-group, boys and girls, gathered in front of the children's home, as our parents looked on with pride. Given the age range in our group, I was probably the closest to my actual barmitzvah date. The traditional entry into adulthood for girls in Judaism comes earlier, at age 12, and several of the girls were already fourteen. The girls wore blue skirts. We wore white dress shirts and dark blue trousers. One of the girls gave a short speech on behalf of us all, saying how we hoped to put all that we had been taught as children to the service of the kibbutz and our country.

Then came, for me, the most memorable part. My father, usually so reserved in public, had been chosen to deliver a few words for the parents. I still have a copy of what he said, in his neat Hebrew script. He gave it to me as a gift after the ceremony. At the top, he had written: "Welcome speech from the parents, at

the barmitzvah for Ehud's class." Then, just above the speech itself: "For you, my son. With lots of love."

Rereading it all these years later, I am struck by how powerfully it captured the atmosphere in Mishmar Hasharon, and in Israel, as I was becoming a teenager. The kibbutz may have been formally devoid of religious practice. But this was still a barmitzvah. Our parents' lives in Israel were wholly secular. My father had last been in a synagogue for his own barmitzvah, and my mother only on High Holy-Days as a child. But they were still Jews, part of a tradition that still spoke to them. Any public display of emotion may have been subject to the kibbutziks' code of self-restraint. But they were still our parents, as the very first words of my father's speech made inescapably clear.

"Dearest children," he began, "our hearts are too narrow to contain all the feelings of mothers and fathers on this celebration of reaching the age of *mitzvot"* – the Hebrew word for the 613 obligations in the life of a religious Jew. "Only yesterday we stood by your cots, gazing in wonder at the renewal of creation, and looking, dumbfounded, upon beaming, babies' faces, gripped by tingling anticipation and nervous joy... And suddenly you have sprouted and become grown people!"

The world, he said, had not welcomed our arrival "with cries of joy, or shouts of 'hooray!' You were brought into the world under leaden skies, in the shadow of the horrors of the Holocaust. Our brothers in European lands were subjected to desolation and destruction, and the threat of devastation also loomed over those of our nation dwelling in Zion. In those dark days, we saw in the light of your eyes a ray of hope that the sun would shine again." He went on to talk about the 1948 war, when "a mighty wave burst our borders" and threatened to "wipe away" a Jewish future in Israel. And how it was only the steadfastness and courage of children not much older than us who had kept that from happening: "a generation with the morning dew still in their eyelashes, and childhood laughter still in their mouths, who carried the nation's fate on their backs."

That, he said, was the soil in which we had been planted. And yet, somehow, it had "brought forth fruit. The morning of your lives did not cloud over. Nor was the sunshine dimmed. You have grown older, taller, like new saplings before the arrival of summer." Now, he said, it would fall to us to write the next chapter in our country's story. Our *people's* story too, as he made clear by how he ended his speech. He did not quote from Herzl, or Ben-Gurion. He ended instead with a prayer, albeit with touches of kibbutz imagery sprinkled in.

"Please God," he said, "prepare their steps as they walk forward so that they do not stumble or fall. For they are still soft and delicate. Give their hands strength to carry the burden of generations on these promised shores. And give understanding in their hearts, so that they gain knowledge and wisdom, handicraft and practical skills, to complete the work we have started, and to achieve what we have not managed to do." Finally, he said, "awaken in them, from above, the spirit of yearning for the glory of mankind, just as rain drips from heaven into the furrows of the thirsty fields."

The fact that, only a few months later, I began teaching myself to pick locks was in no way a rejection of what he had said. The eloquence and the emotion with which he spoke touched me deeply. The message – about the world into which we'd been born, and the young country we had a vocation to help shape – were at the heart of who I was then and what I later became, whether as a soldier or a political leader.

But I was also becoming a teenager. A new bit of Hebrew slang had caught on in the early 1950s: the phrase *yeled tov Yerushalaim*. It meant "a good boy from Jerusalem." What it really conveyed was the kind of Labor Zionist youngster, with a good upbringing and a good mind and all the right values. It connoted something else as well: a sense of being a kind of slightly nerdish goody-goody. I knew I had a part of that in me. When I was younger, to the extent I thought of such things, it was an identity with which I felt perfectly comfortable. I was fine with being a bit more bookish, or dreamy, than my schoolmates. I could smile along with them at the gently mocking nickname they gave me: *filoysef* – Yiddish for "philosopher". But now I had an impulse to discover new things, to test out new territory.

Opening a padlock, I figured, couldn't be much harder than deciphering the workings of a watch. But my efforts did not begin well. I did manage to find two slightly rusted locks: one of them a Yale, the other an Israeli-made lookalike called a Nabob. Scavenging near the garage, I began collecting bits of metal. Discarding the ones that were too wide or thick to go into the key slot, I spent a couple of hours after dinner one evening, my back propped against a tree, trying, and failing, to coax either of the locks to open.

It was clear that without discovering how the locks worked, the task would be hopeless. While the U-shaped bridge mechanisms were steel, the body of the locks was a softer alloy. I needed to find a way to cut them open, understand how the mechanisms operated, and come up with a tool that could simulate the role of the keys.

Saturday afternoons in Mishmar Hasharon, after lunch, were a quiet time – like in the old Jewish neighborhoods and shtetls back in Poland, minus the religious trappings. I waited until mid-afternoon, walking past the communal showers and the bakery towards the garage at the southeastern edge of the kibbutz. Its roll-down, corrugated metal door was locked. So was the structure next to it, where the kibbutz blacksmith and metalwork shop were. But attached to the blacksmith's was a hut where the scrap metal was dumped. I doubted it would be locked, and it wasn't.

I didn't dare switch on the light. Pausing to let my eyes get used to the dark, I made my way through the debris and, past an inner door, into the metalwork area. I had been there before, having done shifts both in the garage and the blacksmith's. I went across to the cabinet where the tools were kept. I took out one of the jigsaws used for cutting through metal and, hiding it under my shirt, navigated my way back out again. Cutting the locks open was straightforward. I saw that both the Yale and the Nabob worked the same way – a series of springs and shafts that, in response to the indentations of a key, would be positioned in such a way to allow the lock to open. The hard part was crafting a tool thin and strong enough to get into the keyhole, but wide enough so that, if properly manipulated, it could raise the shafts to the level where the mechanism would open. I returned the next Sabbath, and five or six times in the weeks that followed. By trial and error, getting closer with each hour in the metalworks shop, I finally managed to shape one of jigsaw blades into a pick tool that seemed like it should do the job.

For days afterwards, I manipulated it into each of the padlocks. I knew I had the principle right, but I couldn't get it to work. Blisters formed on my thumb and fingers. Yet then, finally, the Yale sprung open! There were other failed attempts before I repeated the success, first with the Yale and then with the Israeli lock. But with each try I got better at knowing how to put the blade in, when and where to rotate it, how much pressure to apply. Returning to the metal shop to fashion a half-dozen other tools, each slightly different in width and shape, I reached a point where at least half the time, I got the mechanism to open on my first try. Other locks – doors or trunks or closets – were even easier after I made picks for them as well.

It was exhilarating. Not so much because it meant that no corner of the kibbutz was now closed to me. I hadn't given much thought to what I'd use my new skill for. Yet in contrast to my daily schoolwork, here was a real-world

puzzle. I'd labored through all the stages of trying to figure out how to crack it. And I'd done it, on my own.

I couldn't resist sharing my newly acquired skill with a few friends in my class, and word gradually spread to a few other children. There was a handful of slightly older boys who the rest of us had always thought of as "rogues". The label wasn't really fair. They weren't delinquents. They were free spirits, bridling at the uniform expectations, and rules, of kibbutz life. Over the next few years, as mischievous co-conspirators more than close friends, I found myself drawn to two of them. Ido and Moshe had thick dark hair. They were 18 months older than me. Though Ido was then just a few inches over five feet, he was strong and athletic, a star even on the basketball court. Moshe was taller but also a bit overweight. He was nowhere near as strong as Ido, but still a lot stronger than me.

They both had a streetwise intelligence, and a sharp, sardonic sense of humor. Ido's father worked in the transportation co-operative. His mother helped manage the chicken coops. Moshe's father had a more august position: he was *mazkir*, general secretary, of the kibbutz. But his parents had split up, and his mother had left Mishmar Hasharon. Even before our loose alliance began, both of the boys had tested the patience of our teachers to breaking point. Ido had been sent off to the Ort technological school in Netanya. Moshe was moved to *Mikveh Israel*, a boarding school further away which focused not on academic subjects but on agriculture. Ido still returned to the kibbutz every night. Moshe came back on weekends. On Friday evenings and Saturdays, they filled their time with a variety of minor misdeeds and pranks. My role – the cement in our budding partnership – relied on a skill which neither they nor anyone else on the kibbutz could provide. I became the designated lock-picker.

Our first caper targeted the concrete building where I'd begun my life, though the "infants' house" had since been moved elsewhere. Now, on the side of the building nearest to the dining hall, it contained the kibbutz's store of weapons. Its metal door was secured by a Yale padlock. Around sundown each day, the person doing security duty for the night would open it and take out a World War Two rifle, a few rounds of ammunition, and set out on foot patrol around the kibbutz. These self-styled guards, our *shomrim*, would not have been much help if there was ever a real security threat. But that never happened.

We made our move late one Friday night, separated by only a few dozen feet, and a few hours, from my most recent pre-Sabbath piano recital in the dining hall. Each of us came equipped with a thick blanket. With Ido and Moshe

standing as lookouts, I crouched in front of the lock and took out my tools. In less than a minute, I had it open. We darted into the storeroom. Using a penlight, we scoped out what was there: about 80 rifles on racks along the walls, as well as a few heavy machine guns. Each of us took a rifle from the end of the rack furthest from the door and wrapped them in our blankets. We stashed a few boxes of ammunition into our pockets. As the other boys hurried back to our dormitory, I closed the lock, making sure it was in the same position I'd found it, and joined them.

The next day, in the quiet Sabbath-afternoon hours, we stole away through the moshav of Kfar Chayim and into a field on the far side. We built a pyramid of stones and test-fired the rifles until sundown, when we returned to Mishmar Hasharon and replaced the guns in the armory. It felt like the perfect crime: foolproof, since no one was likely to notice anything was amiss. Essentially harmless. And almost endlessly repeatable, as we soon confirmed by returning to the weapons store on Friday nights at least once each month.

There was an intoxicating sense of freedom as we moved on to other adventures. Technically, I realize, they were crimes. But they didn't feel that way. We began not just sneaking off on foot to test-fire the rifles, but borrowing one of the tractors from the garage. We would wait until the kibbutz had drifted into its Saturday afternoon torpor. After I had picked the lock on the garage door, we would hot-wire the tractor – a skill I'd added to my repertoire, requiring only a tightly folded bit of aluminum foil of the sort that was used in cigarette packs – and drive off, stopping only long enough for me to relock the garage. Part of the thrill was the risk that someone might be on a Sabbath stroll and see what we were doing. But all we had to do was to drive a few dozen yards, to where the kibbutz bordered Kfar Chayim. Once inside the moshav, we cranked up the speed, or what passed for speed on a tractor. Ido and Moshe took turns driving. To their amusement, my legs weren't yet long enough to get the clutch all the way down.

None of us had a driver's license, even for a tractor, though that would be the least of our worries if anyone in Mishmar Hasharon discovered what we were up to. Once we were clear of the kibbutz, we headed back west, toward the Mediterranean. We parked on the side of an empty field, set up targets from tin cans, and practiced shooting. We returned before sunset. I would approach the garage on foot, open the lock, and then signal the others that the coast was clear, so that they could bring the tractor back in.

* * *

My modest pre-adolescent rebellion did not extend to doubting the national mission of Israel. We live in a different world now. There is more cynicism about all political beliefs, and all political leaders. Israel is not immune to this. But back then, growing up on a kibbutz, in a country younger even than we were, we felt very much a part of its brief history, and its future.

One of my most powerful childhood memories is of a ceremony we held every year on the eleventh day of the Hebrew month of Adar, in March, to commemorate a gun battle in 1920 in a tiny Galilee farming settlement called Tel Chai. What actually happened there wasn't the point of the commemoration: a mix of misunderstanding, miscalculation and misfortune which led to the death of eight Jewish settlers and, for a time, the abandonment of Tel Chai. The retelling of the event was built around the figure of Josef Trumpledor. Born in Russia, he had served in the Tsarist army in the Russo-Japanese War. He lost his left arm to a shrapnel wound, but insisted on returning to the front. In World War One, served in a Jewish unit called the Zion Mule Corps at Gallipoli and, a few years later, he moved to Palestine.

He didn't live in Tel Chai, but in the nearby kibbutz of Kfar Giladi. At the time, the border with Lebanon was only vaguely defined. The Arabs of south Lebanon were less preoccupied with a couple of hundred Jewish farmers than with confronting the French military – very thinly deployed, but the mandatory authority in Lebanon and Syria, just as the British were in Palestine. On the day of the battle, a group of Lebanese whom the settlers had come to know showed up at Tel Chai demanding to search for French troops who they were certain had taken refuge there. Since that wasn't true, the settlers opened the gate and let them in. What seems to have happened next is that one of the settlers, nervous about what was going on, fired a shot in the air – the agreed signal for help from Kfar Giladi. Trumpledor collected a dozen men and answered the call. In the ensuing battle, seven Jewish settlers were shot dead, and five of the Lebanese. Trumpledor suffered wounds in his hand and stomach. He, too, died, while being evacuated to Kfar Giladi.

The focus of the ceremony was on his dying words. In Hebrew: *tov lamut be'ad artzenu*. "It is good to die for our country." I know that to modern ears, they will sound trite. There is some question whether Trumpledor actually said them at all, especially given their almost verbatim similarity to the famous

dictum from the Roman poet Horace. A popular Israeli joke in the 1970s and ‘80s was that what he *really* said in his final moments was: *“Yop tvayu mat*!*”* I’ll spare readers a full translation. Suffice it to say it’s Russian. It refers to the act of procreation. And it is neither heroic nor lyrical.

Yet to me, from early childhood right through my teens, the words carried huge power. Every year, after sundown on the Eleventh of Adar, the youngsters of Mishmar Hasharon would gather on the lawn in front of the dining hall. The lights in the kibbutz were turned off. Except for the moon and stars, the only illumination came from a series of fires, in a big horseshoe shape, around the edge of the grass. Each school class would march in, and we would take our place around the perimeter. In front, at the open end of the horseshoe, was an Israeli flag. Suddenly, with kerosene-soaked rags shooting down an intricate wire contraption, flames illuminated a series of Hebrew letters. They spelled out different words in different years. Sometimes “Tel Chai.” Sometimes: “Never again.” Or sometimes, the real intended moral of Trumpledor’s heroism: “Follow me!”

The ceremony ended with singing. I still remember the words of one of the anthems. *Ba Galil, be Tel Chai*... “In the Galilee, in Tel Chai, a hero fell. He fell for our people and for our country.” Then, it switched to the first person. “In every moment, in every place, remember me! I fought, and I fell, for my homeland... *Lechu be ikvotai*!” Follow in my footsteps!

What Trumpledor actually said didn’t matter, any more than it matters to American children whether Paul Revere really shouted “one if by land, two if by sea,” or George Washington chopped down a cherry tree. Every nation has its foundation stories. This was ours. In a country only just born, living in a neighborhood pledged to destroy us, it carried real power. The message that I took away from it was that, however important the *collective* ideals of Zionism and Israel might be, the deciding factor when things got tough was *individual* action, sacrifice and heroism.

This resonated especially strongly with me because of a growing restlessness, as I got older, with the splendid isolation of life in Mishmar Hasharon. The roots of this went back to my early childhood and the 1948 war. It was then that the realization began to dawn on me that despite our pride in being the pioneers of the Zionist enterprise, the truly *important* events in the birth of Israel, all the battles and the big decisions, were things which happened *outside* our kibbutz. In the early 1950s, my fascination with stories like Tel Chai developed into an urge to become personally involved in the real-life struggles

of the new state. Even as my escapades with Ido and Moshe satisfied a desire for a different, more adolescent, kind of action, the greater influence remained Yigal Garber. This was especially true after he left to do his army service, when I was twelve. I felt personally invested as my kibbutz “older brother” joined one of the elite fighting units.

The 1948 war had erased any immediate threat to the existence of Israel, but had not brought peace. Palestinian irregulars, *fedayeen* operating from Jordan and the Egyptian-controlled Gaza Strip, mounted hit-and-run raids. In armed ambushes, or by planting mines, they killed dozens of Israeli civilians and injured hundreds more. Exhausted from the War of Independence, the country was in no mood to start fighting all over again. The newly created Israeli armed forces – known as *Tzahal*, a Hebrew acronym for the Israeli Defense Force – also seemed to have lost the cutting edge, or perhaps the desperate motivation, of the pre-state militias. In forming Tzahal, moreover, Ben-Gurion had disbanded the Palmach, the force which would have been best equipped to take on the fedayeen. He rightly argued that now that we had a state, there was no place for militias. His main aim was to disarm the right-wing armies: Begin’s Irgun Zvai Leumi and the even more extreme LEHI. But he had always mistrusted the Palmach’s more assertively left-wing agenda, and he took the opportunity to dissolve it as well. Very few top Palmach officers stayed on in Tzahal, the notable exceptions being three future chiefs-of-staff: Haim Bar-Lev, David “Dado” Elazar, and Yitzhak Rabin.

At first, Ben-Gurion relied on two of the new army’s infantry brigades, the Givati and the Golani, to combat the fedayeen attacks. But although nearly 90 reprisal operations were launched in 1952 and early 1953, most ended in failure, with our soldiers either failing to reach their target or taking casualties. Sometimes, both. In mid-1953, Ben-Gurion and the then chief-of-staff, Mordechai Maklef, decided to set up the country’s first dedicated commando force. It was called Unit 101. It was led by a 25-year-old major named Ariel Sharon, who had been a platoon commander in 1948. With a few dozen hand-picked soldiers, he mounted a very different sort of retaliatory attacks.

The largest, in October 1953, came in response to the murder of a woman and her two children in their home in central Israel. It was launched against the West Bank village of Qibya. Sharon and his commandos inflicted heavy damage on the Jordanian army garrison there. They also destroyed homes and other buildings and left at least 40 civilians dead. Israel immediately came under international condemnation, accused of allowing its troops to unleash a

massacre. Ben-Gurion responded by saying that “no one regrets more than the Israeli government the fact that innocent people were killed in the retaliation act in Qibya.” But in a transparently unconvincing effort at damage control, he also denied Israeli troops were involved. He insisted the raid had been a spontaneous response from Israeli border settlements which had borne the brunt of the fedayeen raids.

Unit 101 was disbanded. It lasted only half a year. But that was not because of Qibya. While realizing the importance of avoiding civilian casualties in future strikes, the new Tzahal chief-of-staff, Moshe Dayan, was now convinced that only units like 101 offered any realistic hope of taking the fight to the fedayeen. By launching reprisal attacks into Gaza and Jordan, he hoped to impress on the fedayeen’s host governments that there would be a heavy price to pay for killing Israelis. Dayan made the fighters of Unit 101 the core of a larger commando force which was merged into Battalion 890 of the paratroopers’ brigade, with Sharon placed in overall command.

Yigal joined this new force. In fact, he was part of its elite commando team, Company A. He took part in a series of major attacks on the West Bank and in Gaza. Avoiding a repeat of Qibya, they inflicted heavy casualties on Jordanian and Egyptian army and police units. They also took casualties of their own. Battalion 890 was based just a couple of miles from Mishmar Hasharon, near a town called Kfar Yona, and Yigal returned to the kibbutz every few weeks. He never talked about the commando operations, at least not to me. But for me, he represented a personal link to the country’s battle against enemies who still obviously wanted us gone. Every time there was a report of Israelis killed in a fedayeen attack, I knew that within days there would be a retaliation raid, with Yigal almost sure to be involved. The imagery of Trumpledor and Tel Chai came from decades before I was born. Yigal’s readiness to put his life on the line was something that was happening now. He was someone I knew. He was my kibbutz mentor, and he was only six years older than I was.

In 1956, two years into his military service, he also took part in Israel’s second full-scale war. For a while, the reprisal attacks seemed to be working. The number of fedayeen attacks decreased. But that didn’t last, especially in the south, along the border with Gaza. Egypt’s pro-Western monarchy had been toppled in a coup, led by a stridently pan-Arabist, anti-British – and anti-Israeli – military officer named Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Egyptian army began providing not just tacit support for the fedayeen, but arming and training them and helping organize attacks across the border. Then, in the summer of 1956,

Nasser also nationalized the Suez Canal, which had been owned by the British and French.

Ben-Gurion was emboldened to go war by the fact that both London and Paris were determined to retake control of the canal and, ideally, topple Nasser. This was the only conflict in Israel's history which was fought, and planned, with outside allies. Under an agreement reached beforehand, Israel was to begin the hostilities, after which the British and French would enter, under the premise that they were separating Israeli and Egyptian forces, and retake the canal. If all went to plan, Ben-Gurion's hope was to end the threat of fedayeen strikes, at least in the south, by taking control both of Gaza and the enormous natural buffer afforded by the Sinai Desert. He also wanted to secure access for Israeli shipping to the Red Sea, through the Straits of Tiran at the southern end of the Sinai.

Militarily, it went to plan. On October 29, 1956, paratroopers from Battalion 890 – including Yigal – were dropped deep into the Sinai. They landed near the entrance to the Mitla Pass, a sinuous route between two lines of craggy mountains just 25 miles from the Suez Canal. The Europeans' bombers began their the air raids three days later, and landed paratroopers near key installations and cities along the canal. Nasser pulled most of his ground and air forces back across the canal after the first few days of fighting. By the end of the first week of November, Israeli forces were in control of the entire Sinai, down to Sharm el-Sheikh at the southern end of the peninsula, and of Gaza as well. It was a comprehensive victory.

But politically, Ben-Gurion and his European partners had catastrophically miscalculated. Britain and France were now fading imperial powers. The international balance of power after the Second World War rested on America and the Soviet Union. Both were furious over the obviously pre-arranged seizure of Sinai, Gaza and the canal, and were determined to see it reversed. It took a while for the message to sink in. In a speech to the Knesset a few hours after the conquest was complete, on the Seventh of November, Ben-Gurion sounded a triumphant note. He did say he was ready for talks with Egypt to negotiate a peace treaty. But he declared the post-1948 armistice null and void, and said that Israel would never again allow "foreign forces" to control the territory it had captured.

As pressure mounted from Moscow and Washington, he realized he would have to back down. Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin wrote to Ben-Gurion, and to the British and French as well, threatening missile attacks on their forces, as

well as Soviet “volunteer” help for the Egyptian army. He accused Ben-Gurion of a “criminal” attack which he said risked calling into question the existence of Israel. The Americans were only barely less brutal in their pressure. They demanded an unconditional withdrawal and threatened to cut off all US aid, and even support Israel’s removal from the UN, if that didn’t happen.

A couple of days after his Knesset speech, Ben-Gurion delivered a national radio address. He had at least managed to secure a concession with the help of the Americans. Rather than the *Egyptians* returning to the Sinai and Gaza, they would be placed under the control of a UN force. In further talks in the months ahead, Israel also secured US backing for a right of passage through the Straits of Tiran to the Red Sea, and an assurance that if the Egyptians restored a bar on Israeli shipping, Israel would have a right to respond. US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles pledged that the UN force would stay in place for as long as necessary to prevent renewed hostilities with Egypt.

But Ben-Gurion had no choice but to announce that Israeli forces would be leaving every inch of territory taken in the war. By early in 1957, they did so. The one lasting military gain came in Gaza. On their way out, Israeli forces destroyed all the fedayeen’s military installations. Cross-border attacks from the south ceased.

Unlike in 1948, the Sinai War did touch me directly. I never felt Israel’s existence was at stake, or in any personal danger. The fighting was brief, and far away. But Mishmar Hasharon actually had a small role in the war plan. Ben-Gurion and Dayan were concerned that Egyptian MiG fighters might hit back when Israeli forces advanced into the Sinai. Ben-Gurion persuaded the French to deploy fighter-jet squadrons inside Israel before the war in case that happened. He also decided to base several hundred reservists from the Alexandroni Brigade in a defensive position near the Mediterranean. A few days before the war, they moved into the eucalyptus grove at the top end of our kibbutz, where it bordered Ma’abarot. It was easy to see why the place had been chosen. The tree cover was so dense that the soldiers were all but invisible from the air.

When it became clear there was no immediate threat from the Egyptians, we kids seized on the chance to go talk to the reservists, some of whom had fought the Iraqis in Qaqun in 1948. I can’t remember whether it was Ido or Moshe who first noticed an area, at the back of their encampment, nearest to Mishmar Hasharon, where neatly stacked boxes of munitions were being kept. But we spent the next several afternoons on reconnaissance. We could see the boxes

clearly, right on the other side of our kibbutz's cemetery. A soldier was always on guard. But there were times the area was unwatched, either when one guard handed over to the next, or on their increasingly frequent cigarette breaks.

We struck late the following Friday. Nowadays, the cemetery in Mishmar Hasharon consists of a half-dozen rows of headstones. Walking through it, as I do two or three times each year, is like revisiting the my own past. Almost all the grown-ups I remember from my childhood now rest there: Bina, my *metapelet*, and her husband Mordechai Bauer. Ya'akov Margalit. My own parents, too. My father died in 2002, at the age of 92. My mother passed away only several years ago, a few weeks after her 100th birthday.

In 1956, however, the kibbutz was barely two decades old. The cemetery was tiny. We figured the chances of anyone but us being there at nearly midnight on a Friday were close to zero. Crouching in the shadow of the headstones, we could see the guard. We waited for a half-hour, then an hour. Finally, he left for his cigarette break. Each of us took a wooden box, and one of the slightly larger metal boxes. Inside, we found a treasure trove of munitions: thousands of bullets for various kinds of weapons. The metal cases held heavier firepower: grenades and mortars. During the guard's next break, we returned those. We were mischievous, but not crazy. Yet each of us now had a crate full of all kinds of ammunition, even including a few belts for machine guns.

* * *

My experience at school began to change in my early teenage years as well. My path through kibbutz school up this point had been smooth rather than spectacular. Some subjects came easily to me, especially math. I also enjoyed our literature classes, and writing essays. I remember my literature teacher taking me aside the day after my father's barmitzvah speech and saying: "Now I know where you get your gift with words." But several other of my teachers told my parents that while I had "potential", I needed to apply myself more. I'm sure they were right. I found most of my intellectual stimulation outside of school. I read almost everything I could get my hands on in the kibbutz library: popular science, history, technology, music and even sports, as well as Israeli and foreign novels.

Shortly before my fourteen birthday, however, our age group was sent to a secondary school outside of Mishmar Hasharon. The kibbutz had come to the conclusion that since there were only a dozen-or-so children in each kibbutz class, it was economically difficult to offer a quality education. So they sent us to the regional high school.

We didn't have to travel far. The school was several hundred yards down the road, in the direction of Tel Aviv. But it was much tougher academically. I was no longer the only kid in my class who loved to read, or who could do math problems in his head. I found it challenging, but also engrossing. It was there that I first got truly interested in science. When I came across concepts that I couldn't understand, our teachers always seemed able to answer my questions or, even better, help me find the answers myself.

The regional school's library was larger and more varied than ours. I began reading about the history of science, and the newest advances. I remember one book in particular, called "The Birth and Death of the Sun" by George Gamow. I got stuck at about page twenty, when he started to deal with chemistry, but that only prodded me to try to learn more about it. I read books about Einstein as well. I especially recall a biography on Arthur Eddington, the British scientist who travelled all the way to Africa to witness a solar eclipse and, in an announcement that transfixed the scientific world, confirmed Einstein's theory of general relativity.

I liked everything about the regional high school. I might well have gone on to finish my secondary education there, and probably should have. But the following year, the kibbutz brought all of us back again. One of the considerations was financial. Like many other kibbutzim, Mishmar Hasharon now decided that in order to make its schools more economically viable it would take in a number of "outside children" – *yeldei chutz* – from towns and settlements around Israel. Yet the latest policy change was also part of a more fundamental debate over the *kind* of education the kibbutzim should provide. Should a kibbutz school, like the regional high school, offer a curriculum tailored to passing the *bagrut*, the matriculation exam, and going on to university? Or should it limit itself to a fairly basic education geared to developing the particular aptitudes or talents needed for a productive working life on the kibbutz?

One fear was that a more rigorous academic approach would undermine the kibbutz spirit of equality by leaving behind children who were less naturally academic. But the main concern was that the brightest kids might end up going

on to university and leaving the kibbutz altogether. In a series of meetings in the dining hall, almost all the members of Mishmar Hasharon supported the model of a basic, kibbutz-oriented education. Some provision was made to subsidize a few youngsters to go on to university, but only in areas that served the greater good of the kibbutz, like mechanical engineering or agronomy.

Still, not everyone agreed with this, and my father became a leading voice among the dissenters. Not only was he opposed to the new policy. He was aghast, and angry. In the only instance I can recall his speaking out at one of the weekly kibbutz meetings, he asked how Mishmar Hasharon could take on itself the right to constrain an individual child's life potential. "We are Jews!" he said. "We are people who have left our impact on history through our scholars, not our peasants. I can't understand how we, who came here to open a new chapter in the history of our people, can choose to keep our sons and daughters from studying. We should be *encouraging* them to study!" He accepted that the interests of the kibbutz mattered. But how could those interests be served – what kind of "model society" would we be creating – if we chose to "doom our own children to ignorance, and cut them off from the great forward momentum of history in Israel and the whole world?"

Years later, friends from the kibbutz have told me how moved they were by my father's words in the *aseifa*. But especially in a kibbutz, the majority always ruled. In this case, an almost unanimous majority. My mother, among them. I could see she felt torn, whether because she agreed with my father's points or because she realized how deeply he felt. But she accepted the decision. For her, that was what was meant by being part of the larger kibbutz family.

My father didn't give up altogether. He realized he had no chance of altering the kibbutz's decision. But he tried over a period of weeks to get me to stay on in the regional high school. A couple of years earlier, examiners had fanned out across Israel to administer the country's first aptitude tests. I finished with only one mistake, in grammar, which placed me among the top two dozen results. "How can you throw your gifts away? For *what*," he asked me. "Ehud, if you leave that school, and give up on going to university, it will be like betraying yourself. With a good education, the *whole world* is open to you." At one point, he walked me out to the patch of hard-packed soil where we parked most of the tractors and farm machinery. "What do you want to do with your life," he asked. "Do you want to be a *farmer*?"

I thought about it before answering. “I don’t know what will happen in the future,” I said. “But if you ask me now, I would say I want to drive one of the kibbutz trucks.”

He was speechless. I could see not just shock, but disappointment, in his eyes. But it was the truth. I did imagine that at some point I might want to make a life outside of the kibbutz. But I had never lived anywhere else. If I was going to remain part of it, I could think of no better way than to join our little corps of drivers. Though they lived on the kibbutz, they spent most of their time on the road, delivering or picking up goods in places like Tel Aviv, Holon or Ashkelon. As the US Marines might have put it, I guess I figured I’d join the truck-drivers and see the world.

The real reason that I said no to my father – as I think he must have known – was that I felt a need to take control of my own life. That was simply a part of growing up, a process which probably happened more quickly for 1950s kibbutz children than for town or city children. We respected our fathers and mothers. But we were living with other teenagers. We were supervised, with an increasingly light hand as we got older, by an adult who wasn’t a parent. We were not just residents of the kibbutz. We were part of the economic collective, working in the fields or orchards, the garage and the metal shop. All of this contributed to a sense of independence. I listened to my father’s arguments for staying on at the regional school. But this was a decision about *my* future, and I believed I had to make it for myself. I did care about my education. But I had reached a stage where my life outside of the classroom, and my circle of friends, mattered more to me.

So in eleventh grade, I returned to the kibbutz school. My father was right about one thing. The level of teaching, especially in math and science, was nowhere near like the regional school. But we also began studying new subjects like economics and politics. There was even a class on Marxism, taught, with no obvious academic qualification, by Ya’akov Margalit.

I did find the Marxism class interesting, and there were two other welcome surprises as well. The first was the arrival of a new history teacher, named Pinchas Karni, who had just completed his masters’ degree. Knowledgable, enthusiastic and eloquent, he had that rare gift in a teacher for igniting excitement in his students. We studied the French Revolution. He brought it to life with insights into the lives of Montesquieu, Rousseau and John Locke, Louis XVI and Mary Antoinette, Robespierre and Napoleon. He presented the revolution not just a single event. He traced the dynamics that led to it, and the

way in which its ideals descended into the bloodshed and terror that followed. In contrast to Marxism – with its certitude, and its insistence that a political theory could define history – he presented history as a fundamentally human process which raised as many questions as it answered. He taught us that it was something we could learn from.

The second high-point was the teaching of a couple named David and Leah Zimmerman. We'd had them as teachers a few years earlier, when David taught us about the Bible and Leah gave us an introduction to Hebrew literature. But now they introduced us to the Talmud, the ancient compendium of rabbinic discussion and debate on the meaning of passages from the Bible. They focused on two Talmudic tractates in particular, Baba Kama and Baba Metziah, in which the rabbis drew on verses from Exodus to argue out a whole system of rules for resolving civil disputes. It was the Talmud of torts. The intricacy and the depth of the rabbinical debate fascinated me.

* * *

Yigal Garber returned from his army service a few months after the 1956 war, when, like other teenagers, I was about to enter the pre-military program known as *Gadna*. There were several different streams you could choose. One was tied to the air force, another to the navy. But most of us joined the reconnaissance and scouting group, *Gadna Sayerim*. It involved field exercises every couple of weeks which were a lot like the ones Yigal had put us through in the orange groves a few years earlier. There was also classroom instruction: on topography, how to read a map, how to find where you were and plot your way to a designated target. At year's end, we took part in a national *Gadna Sayerim* exercise. It was called, a bit grandiosely, *Miyam el Yam* – from sea to sea. In fact, we had to find our way from the Mediterranean, near Haifa, across northern Israel to a lake that which was a sea only in name: the Sea of Galilee. The exercise ran for three days. We were placed in teams of four. I was with a guy from a kibbutz in the north and two others, both of them basketball-tall, from Tel Aviv. We were given topographical maps, with four landmarks marked along the way, which we had to find, and draw in a notebook to prove we'd actually been there.

Hours into the trek, we faced our first challenge. We were making our way along a shepherds' trail, with brush and bramble on either side, when the path

split in two. We had to decide which fork to take in order to stay on course for our first landmark – a stone building five or six miles further on. The map didn't help. At a scale of 1:100,000, each inch covered the equivalent of a mile-and-a-half. The key was to be able to match the broader topographical picture with what we were seeing around us. To use points we *could* identify from the map – Haifa and the sea in the receding distance, and a higher hill to our northeast – to get an idea of which path was more likely to take us in the right direction.

It required a mix of calculation and imagination. You couldn't be absolutely sure of making the right call, but you could greatly increase your odds of doing so. I had known, before the exercise, that this kind of navigation was something I enjoyed. But as my three trek-mates turned to me for this first decision, and on each successive step across the Galilee, I realized for the first time that it was also something I was naturally good at.

Still, the closest thing to real military activity remained my freelance operations with Ido and Moshe. Our wooden ammunition trunks were safely stowed under our beds. We were still borrowing rifles from the kibbutz store for target practice. But the final piece of our arsenal fell into place only in May 1958. For the tenth anniversary of Israel, there was a National Exhibition marking the achievements of the state, held in the town of Beit Dagan on the other side of Tel Aviv. I paid my first visit on my own. I was curious to see what was on show, since one of the themes was Israeli industry and manufacturing. As I walked through, however, I couldn't help noticing the almost total lack of security. One of the most popular exhibits was the aeronautics stand. Even then, Israel was producing blades for jet turbine engines. They were delicately crafted objects, beautiful to look at. When the guy in charge was talking to another group of visitors, I detached one of the blades from its casing, stuck it inside my shirt, and walked out.

Two days later, I returned with Ido and Moshe. We skipped the turbines. But from a stand devoted to the Israeli military industry on the other side of the hall, we managed to come away with a greater prize. We already had a supply of ammunition for an Uzi submachine gun, courtesy of our raid on the Alexandroni Brigade reservists. Now, we had a fully working Uzi.

It was then, however, that the trouble began. Along with Ido, Moshe and the other older boys, I no longer lived in a children's home, under the almost maternal watch of Bina. Several dozen of us were in a larger dormitory, under the more cursory gaze of an older *metapelet*. She was known as Sarah Aleph – Sarah "A". She had been one of the two girls in the group of Russian Jewish

pioneers who had first conceived of establishing Mishmar Hasharon. The other was also named Sarah. Thus “Sarah A” and” Sarah B”. Late-1920s socialists did not believe in something so bourgeois as family names.

As best I could work out afterwards, Sarah Aleph was doing her routine cleaning of our quarters when she decided to dust around the wooden boxes under our beds. She had never given them much thought before. She assumed they contained the assortment of books and papers and other things hoarded by typical sixteen- or seventeen-year-olds. But when she tried to move one of the boxes, she was amazed by its sheer weight. It wouldn’t budge. She got one her sons-in-law to help her. I think the box he pried open first was Moshe’s. But within a few minutes he had opened Ido’s, and mine as well.

Inside each, packed carefully in grease, were hundreds of bullets. and the machine-gun ammunition belts. Inside mine was also our prized Uzi. It would not exactly have taken Syrian Intelligence, or the KGB, to work out the rest. Even though Moshe’s father was general secretary of the kibbutz, there was never any prospect of leniency. If anything, he would have felt a greater responsibility to respond toughly. He and the other kibbutz leaders ordered an inquiry. Ido was summoned first, and apparently tried a brief show of defiance. “What’s the big deal,” he asked. “It’s just stuff we collected. Why should you care?” That didn’t last. Separately questioning Moshe, then Ido again, the inquisitors worked out every detail. The fact that the ammunition had come from the Alexandroni Brigade, the reservists sent to *defend* us in 1956, was bad enough. But the Uzi had been taken from the National Exhibition. That was even worse.

It was left it to the core of young men in their late 20s and 30s, who had grown up in Mishmar Hasharon and already done their army service, to figure out how to punish us. Everyone agreed our thievery could not be reported to the police. That would risk a scandal for the kibbutz. So they decided quite literally to beat some sense into the offenders, in front of all the rest of the teenagers in the dormitory.

I wasn’t there, however. One afternoon each week, I was now boarding a bus into Tel Aviv for my piano lessons. I didn’t get back until after sundown, an hour or so after the beating administered to Ido and Moshe. I sensed immediately something was wrong. Yigal was waiting for me at the bus stop. Quietly, almost like a judge in a courtroom, he told me that what I had done was terrible. Not just because it involved weapons, but because it was a *breach of trust*. Did you really *steal ammunition from the army*, he asked, his voice rising.

And from the *National Exhibition*? I didn't bother denying it. I suppose I felt lucky they hadn't found out about our excursions into the kibbutz's weapons store. He did not administer my beating – I got that punishment two days later, from another of the kibbutz elders. Yigal simply took me by the shoulders and shouted: "You must *never* do this again."

It was worse for my parents. At first, they believed I was an innocent party. They were sure I couldn't have got involved in something like this without being dragged in by the others. My father even asked me whether the reason I'd been "drafted" by Ido and Moshe was because I was small, able to squeeze through windows and doors. As it happened, that had sometimes come in handy. But I said, no, I was not an unlucky bystander. I was as much a part of it as the others. My father was angrier than I had ever seen him. But, if anything, my mother was more upset. She didn't shout. That was not her way. But faced with what must have seemed like a betrayal of every one of her Zionist principles, she told me that she actually regretted the decision not to report us to the police.

Their mood lifted slightly when I began my final year of high school in September 1958, though that did not last for long. After two years back in the kibbutz school, our age-group was sent out again, in another shift in educational policy. This one was in response to signs of growing support, in Mishmar Hasharon and some other kibbutzim, for the argument my father had made against the quality of education we were offering. In order to go at least some way toward meeting that objection – and also, as a bonus, to save money – Mishmar Hasharon was banding together with two dozen other kibbutzim and sending all their 12th-graders to one of two outside high schools. The first, called Beit Berl, was a proudly Labor Zionist institution which focused on the humanities. I'm not sure why, but in addition to a few of the less academic boys in Mishmar Hasharon, most of the girls went there. The rest of us were sent to a place called Rupin. It was closer, just a few hundred yards past the regional high school. It was meant to specialize in scientific research, not only for kids our age but as a follow-on to high school. But I'm sure the attraction for the kibbutzim was that the main emphasis was on agriculture.

A few of the teachers were enormously gifted, even inspiring, and these happened to be in the areas that most interested me: math, physics and, while I'd had almost no background in this subject on the kibbutz, biology. Our biology teacher was a professor from the Weizmann Institute. I marveled as he described to us new discoveries on RNA and DNA. Yet the rest of the

curriculum, and the rest of the teachers, were so *un*-inspiring that I found myself thinking back to our kibbutz school as if it had been Harvard or Oxford.

I did not miss a single math or science class. But otherwise, I began setting my own schedule. Some days, I would sleep late, or not bother going to class. When I did go, I'd often show up without having done the homework. Neither Ido nor Moshe was with me at Rupin. They were beginning their military service and, like Yigal, had ended up in Battalion 890. But it did not take long for me to assemble a new band of mischief-makers. The cast varied, but it was not difficult to entice them to go AWOL. We would walk through the surrounding fields. I especially liked hiking into the area near Kfar Yona, a mile or so from the school, where Battalion 890 was based.

I was warned by the school administrator not just once, or twice, but three times. He said he could not accommodate a student who seemed oblivious to, or dismissive of, the rules. He was especially upset because my attitude seemed to be infecting others. Finally, a few months into the school year, he told the leaders of Mishmar Hasharon, and then my parents, that I would have to leave. If this had happened in the kibbutz school, there would probably have been further warnings. Some way might have been found to avoid the need to kick me out. But here, the decision was final. I was expelled.

My parents did not hide their disappointment. My father was especially upset. A couple of years earlier, he'd had visions of my staying on in the regional high school, excelling, and going on to university. Now, I had been unable even to hold my own in Rupin. Still, both he and my mother were relieved when Mishmar Hasharon and the school worked out a compromise which did not end my studies altogether. The expulsion stood. But I was allowed to continue attending math and science courses.

For my mother, the blow was further softened by the fact that I began working almost full-time on the kibbutz, alongside Yigal, driving one of our diesel-powered Caterpillar tractors. I woke up early and accompanied him into the fields of wheat, barley or rye. We also made a series of trips about 130 miles south, into the Negev, to a moshav called Patish. It had been set up by newly arrived Moroccan Jews. Since they did not yet have the equipment or know-how to cultivate all their fields, they were renting out some of the land to kibbutzim. Mishmar Hasharon had contracted to farm a parcel of about 450 acres.

For ten days at a time, Yigal and I would place a tractor on the back of a Ford pickup and head for Patish to clear the land for planting. In the interests of getting the work done as quickly as we possible, we worked from four in the morning until sundown. After work, we had dinner at a tiny family-run restaurant a few miles away in Ofakim, a so-called “development town” populated by Moroccan Jews who had been moved there as soon as they arrived in Israel.

The farm work was fulfilling. Far from regretting not being in school, I drew satisfaction, and pride, from knowing that while my classmates were still studying, I was functioning as an independent adult. But it also gave me time to think: about myself, my future, and my country. My feeling of commitment to Israel was still absolute. My whole life had been circumscribed by the struggle to create and defend the Jewish state. But I again found myself pondering the challenge of reconciling the *ideals* of Israel, and the Gordonian Zionism I’d been raised on, with the *realities* of building that state.

Back on the kibbutz, it was the example of the gentle, hard-working Baddura which had caused me to question how we were treating the Jews who had arrived from Yemen. In the Negev, I came face-to-face with members of the even larger post-war influx from Morocco. An initial 30,000 had left soon after the 1948 war. Larger numbers were continuing to arrive, despite a Moroccan ban on their leaving, with covert help from Israel. Like the Yemenis, they saw the new Jewish state as a refuge, a place for a new life, a place of hope. But economically at least, most of them had had a fairly good life in Morocco, and in Israel they were clearly struggling.

One image, above all, struck me, and it stayed with me for years. It was from the place where Yigal and I always had dinner. If Ofakim was a “development town”, it had clearly yet to develop. Crowded with something like 5,000 Moroccan Jews, it had no visible means of support, and there was no sign the Israeli government was doing much to remedy that, or integrate the new immigrants economically and socially. The “restaurant” where we ate was a side business which one of the families had set up in the dining room of their tiny home. The food was traditional North African fare, and delicious. The speciality was *marak shuit*, a tomato-based soup with beans and a small piece of lamb or chicken. The dining space was lit with a naked 30-watt bulb. The only other light came from the bluish flame underneath a butane cooker. The sixth or seventh time we went there, I was startled by a sudden movement a couple of feet away from where we were sitting. Looking more closely, I saw a weathered

wooden box, the kind we used in Mishmar Hasharon to crate oranges. It was filled with hay. At first, I thought the stirring from inside was the family pet. Then, I saw it was a baby.

I said nothing until we had left. “Was that really a child?” I asked Yigal. “A *baby*?” He replied, with a tinge of sadness but also a look that seemed to convey surprise at my naivety: “Yes. They don’t have enough space for him in the house.”

More than 40 years later, when campaigning as leader of the Labor Party to become Prime Minister, I made a point of visiting the development town of Netivot, also established in the mid-1950s for immigrants from the Maghreb. I used the visit to make a public apology for the way successive Labor Zionist governments had handled their integration into Israel. “I request in my name, and the name of the Labor Party, forgiveness for those who caused this suffering,” I said. A number of veteran Labor politicians, some of whom had been in government in the 1950s and ‘60s, were angry at what I’d said, and let me know in no uncertain terms. But as I spoke, I’d been thinking of the baby I’d seen in the orange crate in Ofakim, which was barely 10 miles away from where I delivered the apology.

* * *

My evolving feelings about the Arabs, the other people with dreams of what they still saw as Palestine, were more complex as my kibbutz childhood drew to an end.

I did not feel the kind of shock, pain or anger over the fate of the absent villagers of Wadi Khawaret as I did when faced with the hardships of the Sephardi newcomers from Iraq, Morocco and other Arab lands. One reason was that I had known our village neighbors only fleetingly, and as a very young boy. I think that if there had been any real prospect of peace as I was growing up, I might have given more thought than I did to what they had endured. Yet the places where they and most of the other Palestinian refugees had ended up – Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt – were countries which had fought to prevent Israel from being established and still wanted to reverse that “catastrophe”. In the decades that followed, almost the only context in which I met Palestinians

and the other Arabs was when we were shooting at each other, not exactly a natural recipe for fellow-feeling.

The simple fact is that we were enemies. They wanted to remove Israel from the Middle East. During my life in the military, I did all in my power to defeat them. I believed that whatever it took, and whatever the price we had to pay, we had to prevail. The price was enormous. I had to watch as many of my friends were buried. But Abba Eban, Ben-Gurion's Foreign Minister, once said that while our Arab neighbors could afford to *lose* a war, and fight again, Israel knew that its first defeat would be its last. He was right.

The problem was that when the situation began to change – after Israel became an undisputed regional superpower, and its existence was obviously no longer in question – that mindset survived, unexamined and unaltered. It was not until the early 1980s, and especially after the first Palestinian intifada a few years later, that I began to reassess how Israel's security could best be assured, and recognize the need to combine military strength with political engagement in a search for a longer-term resolution of our conflict with the Palestinians. For some other Israelis – including, I fear, some current government ministers and Bibi Netanyahu himself – the old mindset survives. In part, I suspect, because it is so much easier to sell at election time.

Still, even as a seventeen-year-old, I did not view our Arab enemies as lesser, or less worthy, human beings. Even by then, I recognized the danger, not just for them but for Israel, in doing so. I also understood why they were fighting us. A few months before the 1956 war, Moshe Dayan gave a brief speech which had a powerful impact on me. It was, nominally, a eulogy. But it was for a young Israeli who Dayan didn't know personally. His real intended audience was the rest of the country, and other young Israelis like me. He spoke in Nahal Oz, a kibbutz set up three years earlier on the border with the Gaza Strip, in an area repeatedly targeted by fedayeen. In late April 1956, a group of Arabs crossed from Gaza and began cutting down the wheat in Nahal Oz's fields. The kibbutz security officer, a 21-year-old recently arrived from Tel Aviv named Roi Rotberg, rode out on horseback to try to chase them away. He rode into an ambush. The intruders opened fire as soon as he got close enough. They chased him, beat him, and shot him dead, before taking the body back over the armistice line. The body was returned, mutilated, later that day after an Israeli protest through the UN.

With Israeli newspapers full of agonized accounts of what had happened, Dayan went to speak at Rotberg's funeral. He spoke for barely a minute. But his

words reinforced his image as a straight-talker, someone with the eloquence, and courage, to tell us hard truths. His message was that we should not blame the *Arabs* for Rotberg's death. We should look at ourselves, our country, and the neighborhood in which we lived. "Why should we talk about their burning hatred for us?" he asked. "For eight years, they have been sitting in the refugee camps of Gaza, while before their eyes we have been transforming the lands and the villages where they and their fathers dwelt." Of course, they hated us, and the state we had established and were building.

In Dayan's view, the reason for Rotberg's death was that he had allowed himself to be "blinded... The yearning for peace deafened his ears, and he did not hear the voice of murder waiting in ambush." The danger, he said, was that other Israelis had become similarly naive. "How did we shut our eyes, and refuse to see, in all its brutality, the destiny of our generation?" A generation which was settling the land but which, "without the steel helmet and the barrel of the cannon, will not succeed in planting a tree or building a home."

But if I was part of a generation that needed to be ready to fight, the 1956 war also brought home to me the need to consider *how* we fought. This meant grappling with the contradiction wired into Zionism from the start: the ability to take up arms, if necessary, to secure our state while also recognizing the Jewishness, the ancient moral code, that was its foundation. The state-builders themselves tried to address this issue. When the Israeli armed forces were established in 1948, Tzahal's doctrine included a principle defined as *tohar haneshek* – "purity of arms" – and an explicit requirement for our soldiers to use the minimum necessary force and do all they could to avoid civilian casualties. Putting "purity of arms" into practice was always going to be hard. All arms kill. In all wars, civilians will die. But that did not make the principle, or the need to be aware of it in combat, any less important.

Even if the soldier called on the make that judgement was someone who had mentored me from the time I was six. Even if it was Yigal Garber.

Yigal's parachute jump with Battalion 890 on the first day of the 1956 war went smoothly. But the ensuing battle, for control of the Mitla Pass, turned out to be the toughest, and most costly, of the war. It was made worse by the fact that it was utterly unnecessary. Under Ben-Gurion's pre-war choreography with the British and French, the simple fact of our landing near the Mitla Pass was to be the trigger for an Anglo-French attack, under the guise of separating the Israelis and Egyptians. In fact, Arik Sharon, as overall commander, received orders from Tel Aviv *not* to take the pass. Only grudgingly, after his repeated

pleas, did they allow him to send in a reconnaissance force to establish whether it was safe to cross.

The “reconnaissance” company walked into a trap. Machine-gun and mortar fire rained down from Egyptian troops dug into the warren of caves and other natural defensive positions high above the pass. It took hours to extricate the stranded Israelis. Yigal’s unit fought its way in from the eastern side of the pass. A small unit from the reconnaissance force managed to get a foothold and open fire from the western side. Almost 250 Egyptians were killed. But 38 Israeli paratroopers also died, the largest single toll in any battle since 1948.

Battered and bitter, the surviving men from the reconnaissance force were then parachuted into the southernmost end of the Sinai, near Sharm al-Sheikh, as Yigal and the rest of the force headed overground to link up with them. By the time they got there, Egyptian resistance had all but ended. Yigal’s company had a brief exchange of fire with 50 or 60 hold-outs in the Egyptian force. But then – after they had surrendered – they were taken into a hall, and shot dead.

At least those were the rumors that began within a day or two of the war. Israel was a much smaller country then, with fewer than two million people. The community of kibbutzim was even smaller, and many of the men in Battalion 890, as in Unit 101, were kibbutzniks. It was inevitable that questions would begin to be asked. In 1948, there had been both shock and outrage over the news that the Arabs had murdered men and women in Gush Etzion after they had surrendered. If the story about Yigal’s unit was true, it meant that Israelis, *children of the kibbutz*, had acted no differently.

Was it true? I asked friends what they were hearing. I asked some of the older men on the kibbutz, my father included. All of them said something slightly different. But I knew what I *wasn’t* hearing. No one answered by telling me it was a lie. When I asked Yigal himself, and he immediately tried to change the subject, I knew that, at least broadly, what we had heard was what had happened. I could understand why. Yigal and the other paratroopers had just seen dozens of their comrades and friends gunned down in an Egyptian ambush in the Mitla Pass. But I didn’t need a lesson *tohar haneshek* to know that it should not have happened. Or that it was plainly, simply, wrong.

But the time Yigal and I made our final trip to Patish early in 1959, I knew it would be pointless to ask him about it. Pointless for both of us. He had made it clear he didn’t want to discuss what happened. Besides, it wouldn’t change anything. I did still respect some things about him: his commitment to Israel,

the fact he'd served in a military unit that had, for the first time, taken the fight to the fedayeen who had been killing Israeli civilians. I appreciated what he had done for me as I grew up on the kibbutz. But just as I had felt that I had to make my own choice on whether to stay in the regional high school, what mattered now was not what Yigal had or hadn't done. It was what I would do, how I would live my life.

Especially since I was approaching a rite of passage that was far more widely observed in the early years of Israel than a barmitzvah. Just as Yigal had done six years earlier, I was about to join the army.